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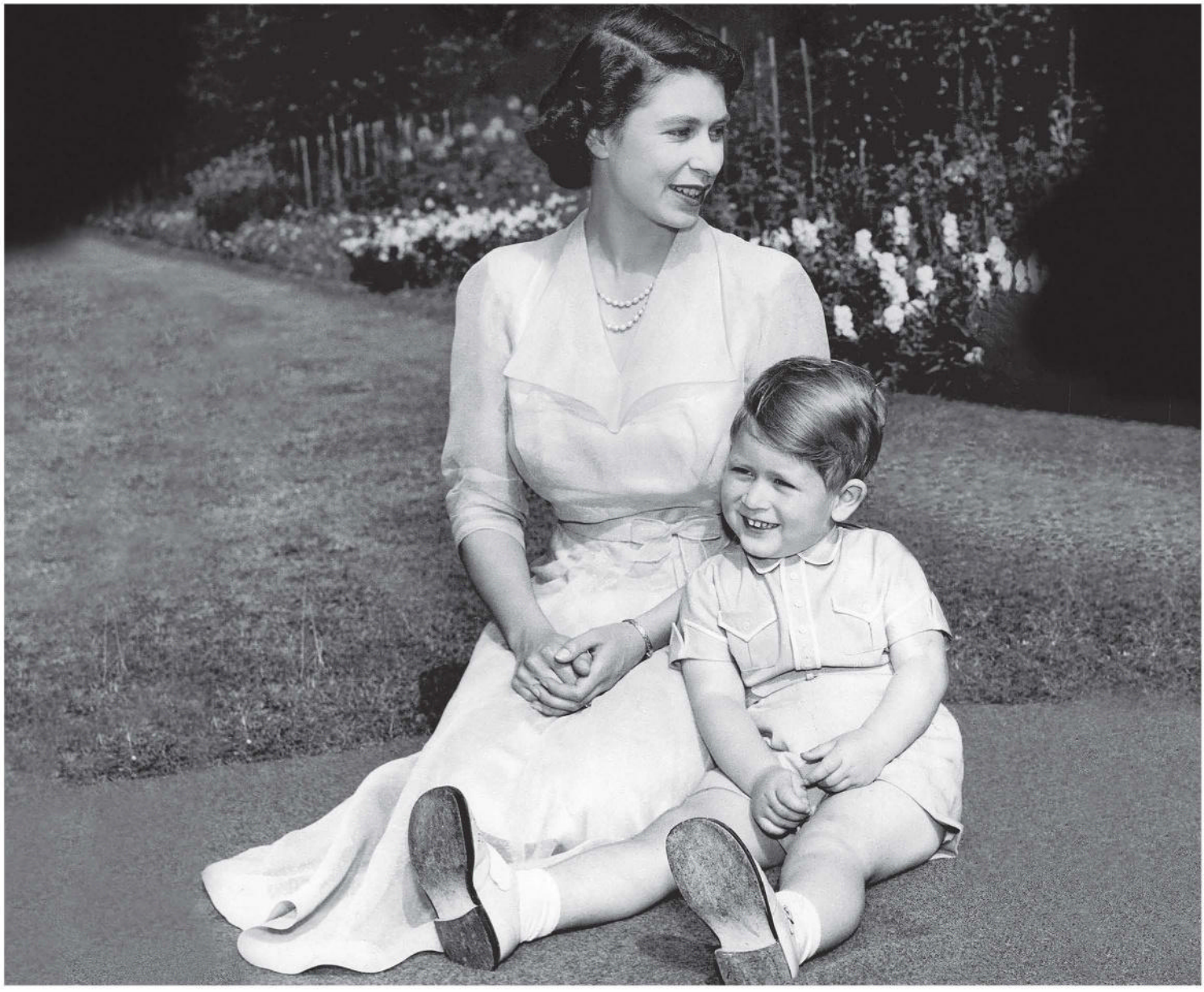

The boy who would be King

The Coronation – Hugo Vickers Rachel Johnson Simon Scott Plummer

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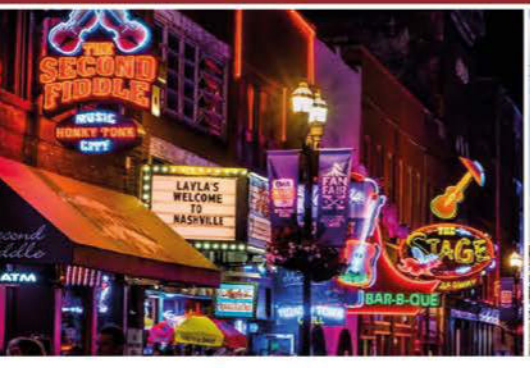

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The Oldie
Moray House, 23/31 Great Titchfield Street, London W1W 7PA
www.theoldie.co.uk

Subs queries? Email theoldie@subscription.co.uk or phone 01858 438791

ABC circulation figure July-December 2021: 48,249

Editor Harry Mount
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Publisher James Pembroke
Patron saints Jeremy Lewis, Barry Cryer
At large Richard Beatty
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***Oldie* subscriptions**
To order a print subscription, go to www.subscription.co.uk/oldie/offers, or email theoldie@subscription.co.uk, or call 01858 438791, or write to *The Oldie*, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Market Harborough LE16 9EF.
Print subscription rates for 12 issues: UK £49.50; Europe/Eire £58; USA/Canada £70; rest of world £69.
To buy a digital subscription for £29.99 or single issue for £2.99, go to the App Store on your tablet/mobile and search for 'The Oldie'.

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Front cover Princess Elizabeth with her son, Prince Charles at Clarence House, 1951. Alpha Historica / Alamy

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The Old Un's Notes

Is there anything more heart-warming than a church kneeler?

And now this most British of things has found its biographer in the shape of Elizabeth Bingham, the leading authority on Anglican church kneelers and founder of the website parishkneelers.co.uk.

Bingham's new book, *Kneelers: The Unsung Folk Art of England and Wales*, includes some of the loveliest kneelers ever made, including the one pictured (*right*).

It also tells the story of the kneeler. The earliest surviving examples go back to the early-17th century: two Turkey-work kneelers for Wadham College, Oxford, one in honour of the college's founders, Nicholas and Dorothy Wadham, the other for James I.

Since then, kneelers have come in all materials, including, in 1915, Rexine – that familiar red fake leather. All was well until it was discovered that the ingredients of the fabric included cellulose nitrate, a low-powered explosive.

The Coronation in 1953 relaunched a boom in kneelers. Wildlife and plants became popular subjects, as did local pubs, shops, castles and factories. One features the slip road to the A14.

Elizabeth Bingham noticed a decline in kneelers in the 1980s – exacerbated by a decline in churchgoers and a decline in those who kneel in church. In Derby Cathedral, 1,500 canvas-work kneelers are in store. In many parish churches, kneelers have even been binned.

Second World War kneeler at St Mary Magdalene, Woodstock

'Modernising clerics are removing pews in favour of chairs,' Bingham writes. 'Few chairs are designed to accommodate kneelers. Only small contortionists can manage to kneel in the rows of chairs in Westminster Abbey's transepts.'

Here's hoping the Abbey will be crammed with kneelers, and people kneeling on them, for King Charles's Coronation, however much they must contort themselves!

RIP the great *Oldie* cartoonist Wally Fawkes, who has died aged 98.

Aka Trog, Wally was a regular *Oldie* illustrator, drawing a caricature for the books pages every month between 2001 and 2005 before failing eyesight forced him to retire.

He was also one of the world's best clarinet-players, performing alongside his great friend trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton.

In *The Oldie*, he told interviewer Margaret Crick there was an empathy between cartooning and jazz: 'You're drawing in the air really. With jazz, you've got to keep to the same chords and get them right, but you start improvising, as with a caricature.

'The clarinet and the pen are similar: with the clarinet you depend on the reed at the end, and with a pen it's the nib. You dip the nib into ink and you dip the reed into your head. The artist whose drawings most look to me like music is Quentin Blake – he's one of my favourites.'

Jazz-loving politician Ken Clarke said Trog was his

Among this month's contributors

Jan Moir (p20) is a columnist at the *Daily Mail*. She was restaurant critic at the *Daily Telegraph* and worked at the *Observer*. She won Interviewer of the Year at the British Press Awards.

Duncan Campbell (p32) was crime correspondent and Los Angeles correspondent for the *Guardian*. He wrote *If It Bleeds*, *The Paradise Trail* and *That Was Business, This Is Personal*.

Hugo Vickers (p40) is our leading royal biographer. He wrote biographies of the Queen Mother, the Duchess of Windsor and Queen Mary. His latest book is *Coronation: The Crowning of Elizabeth II*.

Christopher Howse (p59) writes for the *Daily Telegraph*, where he's been Letters, Comment and Obituaries Editor. He wrote *Soho in the Eighties*, *A Pilgrim in Spain* and *The Train in Spain*.

NEIL SPENCE

NOT MANY DEAD

Important stories you may have missed

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News Shopper

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KATHRYN LAMB

Tony Benn, Max Beerbohm and Janet Street-Porter – by Trog

favourite political cartoonist.

He particularly liked Flook, the small, woolly creature who appeared in the *Mail* for 35 years. Clarke said, 'When I was a small boy I was a fan of Flook... Probably my favourite Trog – although it's not terribly flattering – is of John Major and myself as a couple of beached whales.'

✻ Calling all literary oldies: there's a new game for word-lovers, League of the Lexicon.

It's a sort of Trivial Pursuit for book addicts. Questions include the below (answers are at the end of the Old Un's Notes).

1) Which sentence uses ie correctly?
A Politicians are a slippery lot, ie Nixon
B Politics is incestuous, ie it's all about who you know

2) *Doom* is from the Old English word *dom*. What does *dom* mean?
A Final
B From God
C Law

3) The last chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses* contains 4,391 words and how many full stops?
A None
B One
C Two

✻ The Old Un's friends find themselves frequent attenders at funerals and memorials, their long black coats increasingly frayed at the cuff.

Within weeks this year, they have mourned three Fleet Street legends – Charlie Wilson (see page 44), Paul Johnson and Godfrey Hodgson.

Gathered scribes always appreciate the music sung by heavenly choirs: Paul Johnson's Requiem Mass, including the Requiems of Mozart and Fauré, was particularly divine. They also enjoy the opportunity to sing favourite hymns their poor deprived grandchildren may never even hear, let alone learn.

They feel a special attachment to hymns written by their acquaintances' ancestors. *Abide with Me* was written by Henry Francis Lyte, great-grandfather of the late Charles Lyte of the *Daily Mirror*.

Lord of All Hopefulness, Lord of All Joy was written by Jan Struther, of *Mrs Miniver fame*, alias Joyce Maxtone Graham, grandmother of Ysenda Maxtone Graham (author and frequent *Oldie* contributor).

And *The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, Is Ended* was written by John Ellerton, great-grandfather of Hugh Hudson, the recently obituarised director of several of the Old Un's favourite ads (eg Leonard Rossiter spilling Cinzano over Joan Collins) and of *Chariots of Fire*.

Hudson once said that the title *Chariots of Fire*, from Blake's *Jerusalem*, was crucial to that film's success. His attachment to hymns started when he sang *The Day Thou Gavest* at Eton (a school he otherwise detested).

'It just confirmed my belief in the emotional power of hymns,' he said.

Amen to that.

✻ With the authorities still unsure how to go about repairing the Palace of Westminster – our parliament is a dusty tangle of builders' clutter, scaffolding and hard-hat-area placards – MPs and peers have done what they do best: refreshed a committee.

The Restoration and Renewal Programme Board will now be chaired by Deputy Commons Speaker Nigel Evans and one of its members will be Lord Morse, former auditor general.

Morse has seen a lot of wasteful public spending in his time, but even he may be impressed by the project's improvidence.

The former Conservative cabinet minister Lord Forsyth

'Something's wrong. The hot cakes aren't selling'

'The chair is from Sweden, the footstool is from India and he's from my misguided youth'

pointed out that £300 million has now been spent on 'design and corporate costs and other matters', even before restoration work has properly begun.

Labour's Lord Foulkes suggested the palace just be turned into a museum and parliament found a new home. After all, a crazy £7 million had been spent on a new entrance door for peers. He was swiftly informed that his information was out of date: it was £9 million. 'It's gone up £2 million since yesterday!' exclaimed Foulkes in despair.

By way of explanation, the upper house's senior deputy speaker, Lord Gardiner, explained that surveyors don't come cheap these days.

On 9th May at St Paul's Cathedral, the longest-running choral festival will take place for the 368th time.

The festival is organised by Clergy Support Trust, the largest charity dedicated expressly to helping clergy and their families, who in 2022 supported almost one in five of all Church of England ministers.

The event will unite choirs from Leicester and Llandaff, neither of which has appeared at the Festival for over 30 years, with singers from St Paul's Cathedral. The sermon will be given by the Bishop of Gloucester, the Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, who made history when she became the first female diocesan Bishop in England, and the first female Bishop in the House of Lords.

That's one for the ecclesiastical diary.

Vince Cable is bracing himself for a landmark birthday – on 9th May, he's turning 80.

'Psychologically it's quite a big step, but I'm not particularly excited by the idea,' says the former Lib Dem leader, 'although my family are treating it seriously and my daughter is organising a family event with 20 of my relatives.'

Cable, who's just returned from a pre-birthday holiday in Laos and Cambodia with his wife Rachel, is doing his best to keep the years at bay. 'I spend a lot of time and money on keeping fit and do a couple of sessions with a professional trainer every week – and I seem to be holding up reasonably well,' he adds.

'I'm a pessimistic optimist. I see the glass as half-full of something not worth drinking'

He's just written a book 'on the future superpowers, India and China', out later this year, and is contemplating writing a follow-up to his 2017 thriller, *Open Arms*.

'My first attempt at fiction wasn't bad, but it wasn't brilliant either – so I'd like to give it another go,' he says.

Lib Dem leader turned top thriller-writer? Now that would be a story.

Raise a glass of Pomeroy's Plonk to the writer and barrister John Mortimer on 21st April, which would have been his 100th birthday.

A man of many parts, Mortimer was a one-member Communist cell while at Harrow in the 1930s. He got sent down from Oxford after writing some indiscreet letters, but returned to take his law degree before being called to the Bar in 1948.

A tireless champion of free speech, and not averse to an audience, he subsequently appeared for the defence for everyone from the publishers of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to the Sex Pistols.

In 1971, Mortimer also led the defence in the *Oz* obscenity trial, after an otherwise obscure satirical magazine provoked the ire of the law by depicting the beloved children's character Rupert Bear in close congress with a woman.

'This case stands at the crossroads of our liberty, at the boundaries of our freedom to think and write and draw what we please,' Mortimer announced on the first day of the proceedings, which resulted in a guilty verdict, later overturned on appeal.

Mortimer's greatest achievement was to create, in Horace Rumpole (*Rumpole of the Bailey*), that apparent contradiction in terms, a lovable lawyer. The henpecked, claret-tippling Rumpole began life on the BBC in 1975 before the series transferred to ITV from 1978 to '92. Mortimer, never a martyr to false modesty, was rightly proud of the character, whom he based in part on his Wordsworth-quoting barrister father.

Happy 100th, John Mortimer!

A gourmand, devoted socialist, irrepressible flirt, gossip and lifelong friend of the underdog, in the end Mortimer transcended all of these things and became a national treasure.

He died in 2009, at the age of 85, at his home in the Chilterns where he had lived, with time off for good behaviour in Tuscany, since childhood.

League of the Lexicon answers:

1) B
2) C
3) C

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SCAN ME

What a dame! Happy 90th, Joan Collins

With eight decades in showbiz under her belt, the star told me the five secrets of her success

Joan Collins turns 90 on 23rd May. It's hard to believe (even when you look very closely – and I have), but it's true.

When I turned 75 in March, she called me on my birthday – and she gave me a generous present, too. As Dame Joan enters her tenth decade, I want to return the compliment with a small bouquet of my own.

She is a phenomenon. Other than the late Elizabeth II, who had an inherited advantage, no other British woman of our time has sustained international celebrity across seven decades.

Joan of spark

Like the late Queen (whose Coronation in 1953 she remembers vividly), Joan's heritage is fundamental to her story and her success.

She was born into a showbusiness family in 1933 (her father was an agent, her mother a dance teacher), she made her stage debut in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* at the age of nine, found herself at RADA at 16 and, in 1951, aged 18, she signed up to the Rank Organisation, appeared in her first movie (*Lady Godiva Rides Again* – what else?) and was voted Most Beautiful Girl in Films. Since then, she's not looked back.

She doesn't believe in looking back, of course, though if you catch her in the right mood she will give you an amusing retrospective rundown of the men she has known and loved.

Joan has been through four husbands and a casting directory of A-list paramours (James Dean, Terence Stamp, Ryan O'Neill, just for starters).

They were not always gentlemen. 'You're a f**king bore,' said one of them, 'And you're a boring f**k,' rejoined Joan.

They didn't always deliver. 'How was my brother?' asked Shirley MacLaine with reference to Joan's momentary engagement to Warren Beatty.

'Overrated,' said Joan.

And they didn't always last. Indeed, none of them lasted until Percy Gibson, her fifth husband, came along.

Percy is a delight: good-humoured, handsome, always impeccably turned out, 31 years his wife's junior. To every cynic's surprise, their union has just come of age. They have been married for 21 years; see them together (as I have) and it's clear it works.

Joan explained to me once that she always yearned for a sustained relationship, but simply hadn't had much luck.

'With Tony [Newley, husband number two, eight years] and Ron [Kass, number three, 11 years], I wanted the marriages to work. I wanted them to be good fathers. I chose them subconsciously because I thought they would be good providers. They were extremely successful when I married them.'

Her last live-in lover before Percy was Old Etonian art dealer Robin Hurlstone. They managed 13 years, which was good going by Joan's standards.

'I think one of our problems,' she told me, 'was that it was hard for him to deal with my baggage, which is signing autographs, being photographed, going to parties.'

Percy carries Joan's baggage to the manner born. And it can't always be easy because Joan is a Star with a capital S. When she walks into a room, you notice. She is noticeable. When she speaks, you listen. But she's worth listening to. She is very funny.

If we admire Joan Collins (and I certainly do), it is not just because of what she has done professionally – though *The Stud* and *The Bitch* were memorable and *Dynasty* was fun, and I *loved* those Cinzano ads with the great Leonard Rossiter – but because of what she is.

Her style, spirit and staying power are something to reckon with. She's still here because she wants to be. She is still an event because she makes herself one.

Have you heard of 'manifesting'? Essentially, it's the practice of thinking aspirational thoughts with the purpose of making them real. It's all the rage these days.

Joan has been doing it for years. If she wants a standing ovation, she manifests one. I have seen her in action. It works.

I once asked her for a summary of the secrets of her success.

'How many do you want?' she replied, not batting an eyelid (and boy does she have eyelids to bat). 'Five,' I said ambitiously, knowing that, being the ultimate professional, she would give me exactly what I wanted.

'OK,' she nodded, narrowing her eyes. 'One: energy. Mine is God-given. My mother used to call me Miss Perpetual Motion because I never kept still. Two: exercise. Use it or lose it. That's true of everything. If you stop talking for a week, your tongue would atrophy.

'Three: optimism. Cultivate it. Do you know the story of the twins who went into the shed full of horseshit? The first boy said, 'Ugh, this place smells terrible.' The second boy said, 'Mmm, horse shit... There must be a pony here somewhere.

'Four: work, work, work. If you want to do something, do it for yourself. Nobody ain't going to do it for you. Five: live for today. Remember – yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift. That's why it's called the present.'

Happy birthday, Joan – and many happy returns. You will get the Order of Merit on your 100th.

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My dream job? A full-time burglar

Oh, for a life of crime – with no training and no chance of being caught

MATTHEW NORMAN

Inspired by the Government's post-COVID drive to coax the venerable back to work, I've been thinking hard about a new career.

This contemplation stems from two sources. One is financial pressure. For reasons requiring no explanation to readers of this column, the journalistic income has of late dried up alarmingly. It would be a relief to find a more gushing revenue stream.

In a First World country such as Finland or the Netherlands, someone approaching his 60th birthday could look forward to a decent state pension. Here, a far more meagre pay-out now kicks in at, so far as I remember, 91.

The non-financial motivation is patriotism. I was greatly moved not long ago by the words of one Guy Opperman, an employment minister. 'Older workers are a huge asset to our country. I want to support them to get into work,' he declared. 'An age-inclusive workforce makes business sense too. Our 50 PLUS Champions will work … to connect job-ready people with the vast number of opportunities out there.'

Mr Opperman is right. It would be great for the job-ready likes of me to find employment. The question is, in which field?

After exploring some among that vast number of opportunities, I've reached this conclusion. As any self-respecting 50 PLUS Champion would agree, the work best suited to someone like me – bone idle by nature, qualified for nothing – is burglary.

Now there was a time when seizing this work-related opportunity deep into middle age might have appeared to verge on the reckless. But that was way back, when we had a functioning police service.

Happily, this is no longer the case. These days, the police, in rare moments carved out between sexually assaulting women and racially abusing colleagues of colour, have only one function. This is an adjunct to the home-insurance industry, doling out crime-reference numbers to victims of the burglaries they wouldn't dream of demeaning themselves by investigating.

Even if they did retain a sporting interest in apprehending criminals, the career would still be enticing. Much the most effective way for the genteel pauper to cut expenses, after all, is by becoming His Majesty's house guest, and saddling that sovereign with the tabs for food, heating and so on.

Admittedly, that theory's appeal relies on one's landing up in the right sort of prison. An ageing Jewish neurotic might not take to life in Belmarsh, Parkhurst or any of those houses of correction where every few months some poor sod dies from the burst stomach ulcer that would have been cured by a short course of tablets.

A couple of years in an open prison, on the other hand, might be just the ticket. Some 20 years ago, I joined the *Guardian*'s crime editor, Duncan Campbell (who writes in this issue on page 32), on a visit to Peter Scott, a beguiling Irish rogue fabled in the sixties as our finest cat burglar, in HMP Ford.

Scotty had never, he said, been happier. He had a key to his room, all the books he could read, and a patch of rose garden to himself. Whenever he wanted drink or women, these were easily imported over the prison wall.

Even if Ford and its ilk have, like all other state-funded ventures, deteriorated drastically since then, the extreme unlikelihood of being caught for housebreaking makes that little deterrent to the wannabe Raffles *du jour*.

The masterplan is to begin with the low-hanging fruit, fine-tuning the skills and building the confidence before branching out into more challenging jobs.

Last week, when my mother's lovely next-door neighbours mentioned an imminent trip to France, I subtly ascertained that their house has no alarm. As soon as they return, I will suggest a neighbourly key swap, preparatory to cleaning them out when they next go away.

Given the absence of any evidence of forced entry, they may well have their suspicions. But of what relevance will those be when the filth will limit their involvement to facilitating the insurance claim?

While accepting that burglary may not feature among the vast number of workplace opportunities they have in mind, I want to reassure Guy Opperman and his 50 PLUS Champions of this: I will of course declare all my earnings on future tax returns (assuming that payments to one's fence and the cost of jemmies, wire-cutters and other tools of the trade, are deductible expenses). HMRC will be every inch as concerned about the source of income, you presume, as the Metropolitan Police.

Yesterday, I informed my mother of this exciting career development.

'Please don't take offence…' she began in response.

I yelped. Traditionally, she regards causing offence less as something to avoid than as a moral obligation.

'Don't take offence,' reiterated my mother, 'but I don't think you're cut out for it.'

'Because I'm too decent and honest?'

'Good God, no,' she said. 'Because you're a coward. You'd be too terrified of getting caught.'

However accurate the character reading, I murmured while browsing Amazon for skeleton house keys, hers was an anachronistic objection rooted in an ancient policing past.

OLDEN LIFE

WHAT WERE preceptors?

What do H G Wells, David Puttnam and Trevor McDonald have in common? The answer is they all have links with the College of Preceptors.

The College of what? The word *preceptor* in Victorian English means teacher. In a bygone age, for those teachers practising in schools in Britain, a lot centred round the College of Preceptors.

A member of the preceptors belonged to a pioneering group of private teachers in Victorian England.

H G Wells worked for the college, mainly as an editor on their newspaper the *Educational Times*. Before graduating from London University in 1890, Wells passed the preceptors' exams in the theory and practice of education, maths and natural sciences.

Trevor McDonald was made an honorary fellow of the college in 2001. Film producer David Puttnam was made honorary fellow of the college in 2002.

Nicholas Nickleby beats Wackford Squeers

The preceptors set out to regulate the teaching 'profession', as the General Medical Council does for medics today.

The preceptors were set up in a pub, the Freemasons' Tavern, in Bloomsbury in 1849. For a cash sum, valued in today's money at around £100,000, the college bought a royal charter from Queen Victoria. The document's wording gave little power to the preceptors and quite frankly was not worth the paper it was written on.

'Strike them off the register for reasons of incompetence or fraud,' the preceptors bellowed, when they gathered at Bloomsbury from all over Britain in 1846.

The truth is that these characters, like the teachers in Charles Dickens's portrayal of Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *pictured*, fell well short of the standards expected today.

The preceptors nevertheless found office accommodation near the British Museum in central London. They went on to do much for women's equality, having the first 'ladies' department in Europe.

The preceptors morphed into the College of Teachers in 1998 and then in 2017 into today's Chartered College of Teaching (CCT).

As for the original preceptors, they are long gone.

Professor Richard Willis

Richard Willis is a visiting professor at the University of Sussex

MODERN LIFE

WHAT IS circumboob?

Circumboob is a recent trend in décolletage – the boob trend that brings all other boob trends full circle, so to speak.

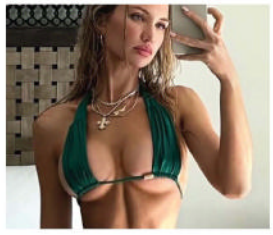
Imagine a swimsuit cut so as to show the full circumference of the female breast while (crucially) shielding the nipple.

You don't have to imagine it. Just head to the Instagram page of Australian model Gabrielle Epstein, who pioneered the look in February, posing in a green bikini that Isambard Kingdom Brunel would have been proud to have engineered.

The image prompted a flurry of reports about how 2023 is the 'year of the circumboob', a boob trend for a 'chaotic era'. None of these reports noted that anyone hoping to follow the trend will likely require serious plastic surgery – for boobs do not generally behave this way in the wild.

Necklines have always risen and fallen, but in the 21st century we've seen a variety of new angles, vectors and approaches.

Innerboob, for example. Here, the two breasts are separated (typically by an open blazer and copious amounts of 'tit tape') to reveal the valley in between. Then there is sideboob, where a hillock of flesh is revealed through the side of a dress. There is also underboob, where the lower hemispheres are made visible by, say, a cut-off top.



Barely there: Gabby Epstein

Circumboob is the first trend to incorporate innerboob, sideboob *and* underboob – thus completely circumnavigating the breast. I suppose this makes Epstein the Vasco da Gama of breast-influencers.

Where next? Will we move towards *full exposure*? Unlikely. Circumboob is about as far as you can go without triggering the AI censors – since Instagram has an absolute ban on female nipples.

OK! So maybe we will leave the gravity of the boob altogether. This seems more likely. 'Bum cleavage' is already 'having a moment', according to *Fashion Journal*. And as far back as 2018, the *Sun* was declaring 'pelvage' (that's a cleavage between the pelvis and pubic area) to be 'the new sideboob'.

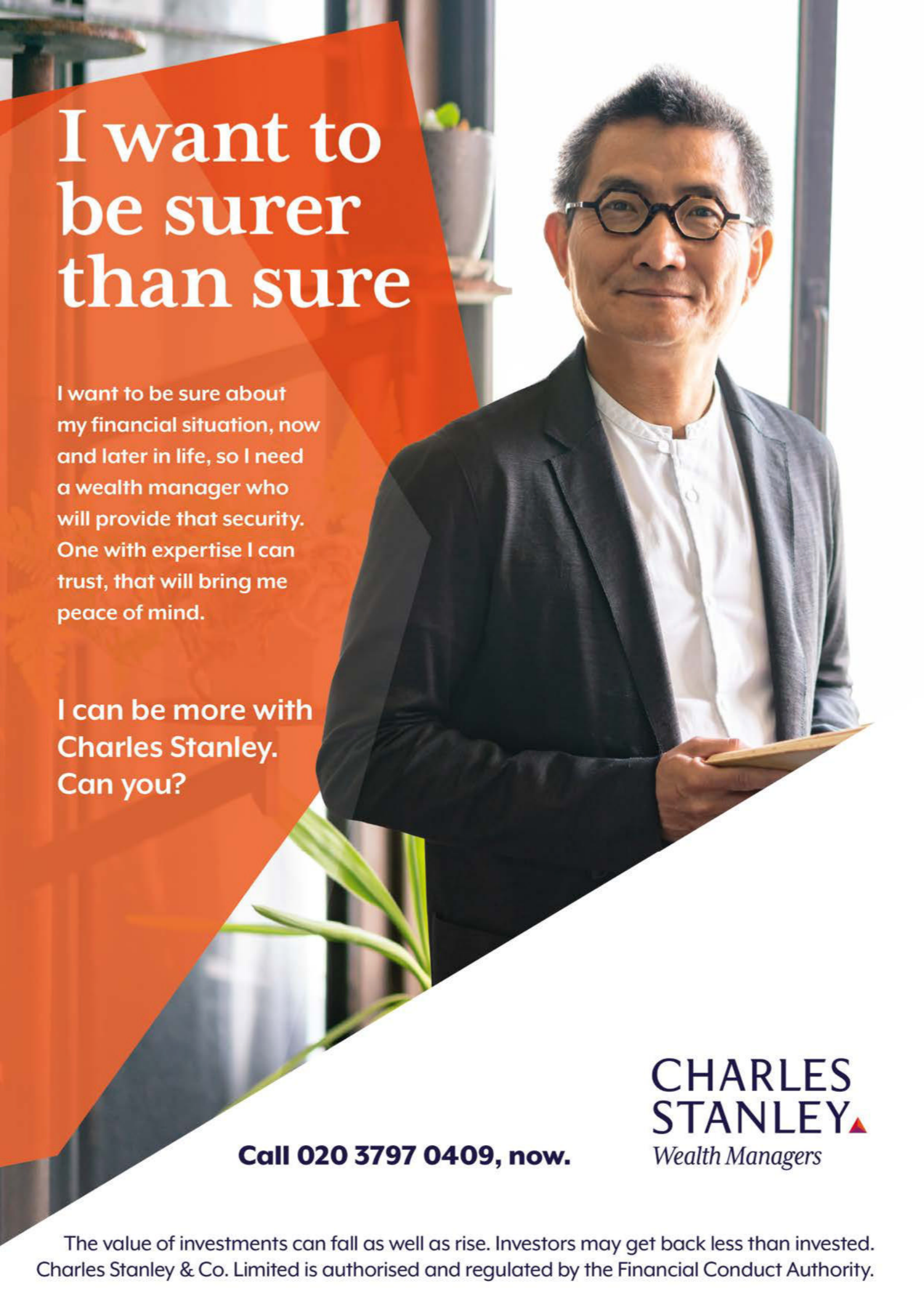
The reason for all this activity is not, as you might suppose, to attract sexual partners. Rather more dully, it's to attract clicks, likes and comments online. A Google search unearths 'Emma Corrin flashes some serious sideboob in a sheer jewel top', 'Rita Ora flashes plenty of underboob in a TINY knitted crop top' etc.

Back in 2019, the American writer Jia Tolentino coined the term 'Instagram face' to describe how social media, picture-editing software and cosmetic surgery were conspiring to push all female faces towards a 'single cyborgian look'. The faces that do well online (Kim Kardashian, Gigi Hadid, Rita Ora, etc) all look eerily similar, she noted.

The same is perhaps even more true of Instagram boob. As we speak, silicone is being shaped, dotted lines are being marked, knives are being sharpened – all with a view to increasing those clickbait numbers.

Richard Godwin

INSTAGRAM.COM/GABBYEPSTEIN



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Simon Scott Plummer was a choirboy at the funerals of George VI and Queen Mary – and at the last coronation

A choir fit for a queen

St George's School choristers, St George's Chapel, Windsor, 1953. Simon is 2nd row, middle, behind the choirmaster

During my time at St George's School, Windsor, the funerals of George VI and his mother, Queen Mary, the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and the installation of Winston Churchill as a Knight of the Garter all took place.

The funerals and the Garter service were held in St George's Chapel, where I was a chorister. For the Coronation, our choir was one of many invited to sing in Westminster Abbey.

Over 70 years, memories fade or are altered. So I shall turn first to what, as a 12-year-old, I wrote to my parents five days after the greatest of those royal events, the Coronation. The letter opens with personal matters rather than the historic occasion – Nigel Molesworth slightly *avant la lettre*: *Down with Skool!* would appear that autumn.

'Dear Mummy and Daddy,

'Thank you very much for taking me out on last Monday and giving me such an excellent lunch at the Old House Hotel [in Windsor]. Also thank you for your letters and Children's Newspaper. Please could you send me a two-pound pot of Red Plum Victoria Jam and a one-pound pot of Frank Cooper's hard honey.

'The Coronation was magnificent and the colour was perfectly beautiful. We had just next to us a superb orchestra comprising the best players in England who played everything faultlessly and kept wonderfully together under their outstanding leader Paul Beard. We were roused by Miss Wright [assistant matron] at 4.25am and after a quick breakfast we were supplied with Spangles [fruit-flavoured boiled sweets] and a tin of Horlicks Milk Tablets.

'We changed in the Westminster [School] Gym and had great fun socking the punchball. Mr Cleave [our headmaster], who was supervising us, gave us a small packet containing two ginger biscuits and an egg sandwich and an orange bottle filled with milk. We had to wait four hours in the Abbey before the service began and during that time a number of processions passed into their stalls.

'The Queen's dress was lovely. It was studded with diamonds and pearls and had attached to the back of it a velvet, mauve train embroidered with white lace and ermine. Prince Charles [then aged four] was sweet. He poured incessant questions upon his patient grandmother and was delighted with the fanfares which numerous times echoed and re-echoed round the Abbey.

'We got back to school just in time to see the end of the procession and later we listened to Winston Churchill's and the

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Simon Scott Plummer today, with his Coronation Medal – and, right, the certificate from Buckingham Palace

Queen's Speech and the lighting up of the Mall. We retired to bed just before the fireworks. I didn't feel at all tired and it was a great day which I shall never forget.

'Yesterday we paraded after lunch on the lawn and Mr Cleave gave us our [Coronation] medals. They are lovely and we will wear them for the first time on the Queen's official birthday on 11th June.'

My strongest memory today, shared with other choristers to whom I have spoken, is of the music. In the galleries built for the occasion we were next to a 60-strong symphony orchestra, occupying the screen which separates the choir from the nave, an electrifying experience for boys who had not seen such a group of players before, let alone at such close quarters.

I remember in particular the opening of Handel's *Zadok the Priest*, in which violin arpeggios raise the tension to an almost unbearable pitch before it is released with the explosive entry of the choir, a body at the Coronation nearly 400-strong.

I was also struck by the pure, bell-like tone of two Abbey boys in Vaughan Williams's *O Taste and See*, the motet commissioned for the Coronation from the 80-year-old composer, a hunched figure who attended one of the rehearsals in St Margaret's, Westminster.

Nicholas Hare, a fellow chorister at St George's, then aged 12, recalls the trumpet fanfares. Chris Brown, a nine-year-old in the Abbey choir, remembers the 'somewhat raucous but enthusiastic "singing" of the "Vivats"' by the Westminster School Queen's Scholars' as the Queen entered the building to the sounds of Parry's *I Was Glad*'.

Both Chris and Christopher Field, then a 13-year-old member of the Bromley Parish Church Choir who also sang in the Westminster Abbey Special Choir, were impressed by the most substantial work commissioned for the occasion, William Walton's *Te Deum*, scored for orchestra, organ, double choir and semi-chorus, which brought the service to an end.

Brown remembers Walton, 'this very urbane, handsome and famous musician', coming to the song school to conduct the Abbey choir in a rehearsal of what was very challenging music. He was thrilled to get his autograph.

Christopher was bowled over by the *Te Deum*, 'probably the most difficult thing that I, an ordinary parish choirboy, had ever had to learn'. He worked on it with the organist and choir mistress in Bromley at her house.

Music played before and after the service was conducted by Adrian Boult. The music performed during it was conducted by William McKie, director of music at the Abbey. Chris remembers him 'perched on a plinth above the organ' and 'famously hugely nervous being in charge of such a major historical event'.

His beat was relayed to two other conductors, John Dykes-Bower from St Paul's Cathedral and William Harris from St George's. Looking across the central aisle of the choir, Chris saw Dykes-Bower using one of his choristers as a music stand, the poor boy having to hold his score for long periods at a time.

> What to do if we were caught short? There were Elsans in the side aisles

On the opposite side of the aisle, we took our beat from Harris, known to us as Doc H, a genial, roly-poly figure who had been organist at Windsor since 1933.

During the war, he had directed a madrigal group in Windsor Castle formed by princesses Elizabeth and Margaret, senior choristers from the chapel, Etonians, Grenadier Guards and members of the Windsor and Eton Choral Society.

Aside from the music, Chris recalls the Abbey remaining shut for months, with the nave turned into 'one huge building site, full of scaffolding and stacks of wooden planking'. He was fascinated to see 'a railway track running the length of the Abbey from the West Door to carry all the building materials needed to construct the huge array of stands to accommodate the 4,000 extra members of the congregation'.

On Coronation Day, Christopher was amazed by the sight of peers and peeresses robing before the service in marquees in Dean's Yard: 'In my juvenile imagination, this was like the Field of the Cloth of Gold.'

Shortly before the Queen's entry into the Abbey, great amusement was caused by the emergence under the screen of a crew of 'Mrs Mops', with their Ewbank carpet-sweepers, removing the last specks of dust from the gold-and-blue carpet which ran the length of the building. People even stood up, thinking the service had begun.

We had been in the Abbey since early morning, waiting for a ceremony which would last nearly three hours.

What to do if we were caught short? Nicholas remembers being advised to hang on to his milk bottle in case of emergency. There were also Elsans, a long way down, in the side aisles.

Nicholas and I were given our Coronation medals four days after the ceremony. Christopher received his three weeks later by registered post. His mother brought the envelope early in the morning to the tent in their Bromley garden where, as a keen Boy Scout, he was sleeping through the summer months.

My medal has had a few outings since. The most notable was at a get-together of old choristers for Evensong at St George's to mark the 50th anniversary of the Coronation in 2003. Saturday 6th May will be next occasion to air it.

Simon Scott Plummer was the foreign leader-writer at the Daily Telegraph. *He still sings in a choir*

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A very British scandal

Fifty years ago, Lord Lambton resigned from the government after a tabloid caught him in bed with two prostitutes. By *Christopher Sandford*

The departure of 50-year-old Antony Lambton (1922-2006) from government office in May 1973 had all the ingredients of a classic British establishment sex scandal.

Lambton, an Old Harrovian with a reputation as something of a playboy, enhanced by his habit of wearing sunglasses inside as well as out, was photographed reclining nude in a London flat between two prostitutes, with a joint in his mouth.

With help from the *News of the World*, Colin Levy, one of the women's husbands, had bugged the flat, installing a camera and fitting a microphone in a teddy bear.

In scenes reminiscent of the Profumo affair ten years earlier, Lambton resigned both his parliamentary seat and his office as Air Minister in Ted Heath's Conservative government.

An outspoken advocate of decriminalising cannabis, Lambton had always been an odd fit in the traditional Tory circles of the day.

It seems he was a bit of a bounder. When interviewed after his fall, Lambton, who was married, admitted that he had occasionally strayed from the conventional monogamous ideal because 'people sometimes like variety. It's as simple as that.'

Papers later released by MI5 reveal that he had thrown himself into a 'frenzied' round of sex – and gardening – because he was bored with his job.

Lambton, the second son of the fifth Earl of Durham, had first entered Parliament in 1951. Tall and slender with well-oiled hair and a penchant for floral ties, he was a brightly coloured macaw in the rookery of British postwar politics.

It was said by Lambton's critics, of whom there was no shortage on the Tory benches, that he visited his Berwick-upon-Tweed constituency more for the shooting parties than for his MP's duties.

Like his cousin Earl Home, Lambton (whose older brother had killed himself in 1941) was one of those politicians who disclaimed their hereditary peerages in order to sit in the Commons. In time, this led to a slightly surreal debate about whether parliamentary clerks should address him by his courtesy title, Viscount Lambton, as he wished. Only in Britain.

'People like variety': Lambton, 1968

In 1942, Lambton had married Belinda Blew-Jones, known as Bindy, and they remained together, if not always on an exclusive basis, until her death 61 years later.

A famous – and possibly fanciful – story published in *Tit-Bits* magazine in September 1897 claimed that Arthur Conan Doyle, convinced that a skeleton lurked in every household, no matter how respectable that household might be, had once sent a telegram to a venerable Archdeacon of the Church, reading, 'All is discovered! Fly at once!'

The cleric promptly disappeared, or so the story goes, and was never heard from again. Something broadly similar happened when it came to how the police were led to Lord Lambton's love nest.

A raid on a Soho porn shop in early 1973 had turned up a coded notebook of names and addresses.

The only uncoded name – Jellicoe – was initially assumed to refer to 55-year-old Lord Jellicoe, a Tory politician who like Lambton enjoyed a somewhat louche reputation. Jellicoe was interviewed and – as it turned out, needlessly – admitted to 'some casual affairs' with call girls; he resigned from office and took up a City directorship.

In fact, Jellicoe was the name of a north-London house-cum-hotel of doubtful reputation owned by Colin Levy and his wife. When the vice squad appeared on the premises, Levy revealed that Lambton was one of the visitors who regularly lodged with them on an hourly basis.

Briefed on the matter, the Home Secretary, Robert Carr, took the broad-minded view that it was 'no crime to have a mistress'; nor was a compelling security issue involved. At this point, the *News of the World* stepped in as the moral avenger in the affair.

While Jellicoe returned to the private sector, Lambton retired to the magnificent Villa Cetinale in Tuscany, taking a keen personal role in the restoration of the house and gardens. He and his companion Claire Ward, mother of actress Rachel Ward, lived there until his death in December 2006.

Perhaps Lambton also continued to work on the side for MI6, insinuating himself into the diplomatic nightlife of Paris, Rome and Berlin, as he sometimes hinted. Or perhaps his exceptional talent for conversation and unmistakably brilliant mind were never put to any more constructive use than in his writing the occasional book and arranging dissolute parties on his Italian estate.

The shame is that no one has yet got round to making a really good film about him. *A Very Continental Scandal*, perhaps?

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The thrill of boredom

Modern life and technology cut out life's boring moments, when our imagination can soar. By *Albert Read*

While making tea, I recall a friend's advice.

'Get a Quooker,' he proclaimed, referring to a newfangled kitchen tap that can deliver instant boiling water to the teapot. He added, 'Banish the boredom of waiting for the kettle to boil!'

His counsel could apply to many humdrum routines (waiting for the bus, walking to post a letter). There was an implicit notion that boredom is dead time, better used elsewhere, were it not for the dull necessity of quotidian tasks.

I set to work researching the cost of the boiling tap (£1,000+) and the upkeep.

I grew wary. Do I actually *mind* waiting for the kettle to boil – while standing there, alone with my thoughts, staring out of the window? Or do I rather appreciate it? Is a little bit of boredom such a bad thing?

Bored: Isaac Newton

In modern Western society, boredom is perceived as an unqualified negative.

We even fear it a little, reaching for our mobile phones to check our social-media feeds while riding a few floors in a lift. We seek ways to iron out the small gaps in our lives, replacing the careful chopping of the onion with an instant Deliveroo swipe.

For our children, the position is worse: boredom is a vanishing memory.

Rather than spending a long, slow afternoon of playing Monopoly, they are hypnotised by the effortless, passive stimulation of the Play Station 5. If they say they're bored, their parents, with an icy rush of anxiety, will instantly reach for their wallets to fund outings to trampoline centres and games of laser tag.

Some parents might receive the news of this boredom as an opportunity – to encourage their child to do *nothing* or perhaps, as Leonardo da Vinci advised, to lie on the grass and look at the clouds, observing their curious shapes and movements. These parents might recall their own long bouts of inactivity during formative summer holidays, and the falling back on their own inner resources – devising new games on long car journeys or getting lost on a country walk. Such practices all strengthen the muscle of the imagination the better to face the provocations and opportunities of later life.

It is during the quiet moments that the imagination comes alive.

It is between the layers of existence that the best ideas happen. Isaac Newton was almost certainly bored when he was forced to leave Cambridge because of the plague, to return to his parents' house at Woolsthorpe Manor, Lincolnshire, and stare absent-mindedly at an apple tree.

Archimedes experienced a feeling that some would now call boredom, rolling around in his bath, his mind partially disengaged as the water trickled over the sides, allowing him to run down the street and cry, 'Eureka!'

Boredom provokes a useful partial disengagement. The gear stick is in neutral, thoughts coast and the membranes of the mind soften, allowing the unconscious to do its work.

Boredom denotes an immunity to the potential of life's lacunae. We might rebrand it instead as 'stillness for the mindful', to be found in the interstices of life. The Japanese understand this notion and even have a word for it – *ma* – arising from the Buddhist ideas of emptiness and selflessness. It is a comfort with silence amid conversation; the quietness of an intimate relationship. It is the pause in which life deepens its imprint.

There is no English word for *ma* because we do not really grasp the concept. We are conditioned to feel awkwardness and tension with boredom.

We associate calm ritual (such as boiling a kettle) with inefficiency. Words like 'gap', 'absence' and 'delay' carry connotations of negativity and failure. We are conditioned to value things, not the absence of things.

An accelerated world alters the wiring of our minds, and we expect, in turn, accelerated art forms. In the arms race for attention, video, gaming and social media shorten and intensify experience to hold still the hovering thumb on the mobile phone.

In this quest to eradicate boredom, we do not quite know what we are losing. We have no way to measure the small, imaginative treasures, momentary reflections and serendipitous journeys we unwittingly sacrifice at the altar of this new impatience.

While the march of technology brings many rewards, we are beginning to realise that something quieter and more intangible is disappearing – with only dimly-understood consequences for the imagination, empathy and happiness.

What is the solution? To start embracing boredom.

Back in the kitchen, out of the window, I observe the clematis and I spy a blackbird hopping on the garden wall. Meanwhile, behind me, the *drip, drip* of the loosened, non-boiling kitchen tap evokes a memory from Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*.

As a child, Nabokov would move the bathroom door back and forth in time with his own dripping bathroom tap and 'a dreamy rhythm would permeate my being… I appeal to parents: never, never say, "Hurry up," to a child.'

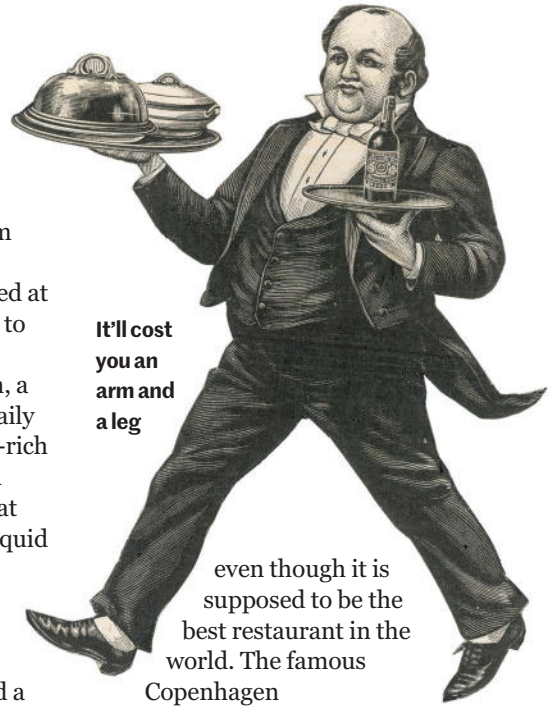
The kettle eventually boils. As I pour the water, I conclude that there are moments when nothing much happens, and yet you feel most alive.

When I next see my friend, I tell him, 'I've decided to pass on the Quooker.'

The Imagination Muscle *by Albert Read (Constable) is out now*

Cost-of-eating-out crisis

£700 for a steak? £9.50 for a plate of broccoli? Former food critic *Jan Moir* is sickened by today's rip-off restaurants



It'll cost you an arm and a leg

There comes an age when you get to a certain age – and that is the age when you are crumbling inside like a landslip, but determined to present a Mount Rushmore-strength façade of youthful capability to the outside world.

Those who have gone before you, those who have already tottered down this path of incipient doddery, often leave helpful hints to navigate the terrain. Here is rule number one; never complain about the price of anything, because nothing is more ageing.

Too true – but who said it first? Dame Joan Collins? Haile Selassie? Obviously, I can't remember. Obviously, I had to Google 'American presidents carved in stone' to retrieve the Mount Rushmore reference and slip it back into a dusty file in the Jan-brain, where it promptly disappeared into the Jan-ether once more. Obviously, intensifying age means I now complain about the price of everything, especially when in restaurants.

Dear God, what has happened to restaurants? Dining out just seems so gaspingly expensive these days, weirdly out of whack with the rising cost of living.

While even the most desultory pub burger can cost £20, inflation has resulted in a 25-per-cent price increase at Nando's, where half a chicken culled from a corner of hell is now £8.50.

The surge is real and some price rises are understandable, but surely not even the pandemic, Brexit, staff shortages, the tomato crisis and Mayfair rents can justify, at a new restaurant called Socca in London, £35 for a portion of beef and carrots? Or £28 for a rabbit leg in the same establishment, which bills itself as a coastal Provençal bistro and adds a 15-per-cent service charge to every bill.

Not that the service is, shall we say, skilled. At lunch, my guest ordered a glass of champagne (£22) and when he complained that it was warm, the waiter decanted his tepid pour into a chilled glass, as if that solved everything.

If anyone did that in a real coastal Provençal bistro, I like to think the resulting uproar would be heard from Toulon to Menton and back again.

If you are in the mood to be amused at restaurant prices, the real laughs are to be had at the top end of the market.

Despite the chill wind of recession, a wave of expensive new places have gaily opened in London, catering to super-rich thrill-seekers who clearly don't mind paying £110 for a lobster pie for two at Mount Street Restaurant or even 30 quid for a vegetable stew with potato dumplings further down the menu.

Who are these people? International gas-pipeline-owners with a sideline in uranium stocks and a desperate need for luxury comfort food and creamy saucing?

Just up the road from Socca, billionaire restaurateur and nightclub-owner Richard Caring has launched a restaurant called Bacchanalia, where guests crowd into a room adorned with sightless statuary, where they are invited to 'dine like Bacchus' on grim fillets of sea bream at £42. Maybe with a side order of broccoli spears for £9.50 plus 14.5-per-cent service – surely the most expensive spears since Marcus Aurelius tooled up his army during the first Marcomannic War.

Over in Knightsbridge, notorious condiment-frottager Salt Bae makes a disgusting fetish of prices at his Nusr-Et Steakhouse, wrapping a chargrilled tomahawk steak in 24-carat gold leaf and selling it for north of £700.

His is the extreme for which there is no excuse, yet even the River Café is slipping beyond the financial moorings of mere mortals, with main courses such as wood-roasted pigeon with green beans now nudging into £50-plus territory and beyond.

Of course, there are lots of restaurants where skill is still in the kitchen and value for money is still on the table, but they are few and far between.

I don't include Noma in this category, even though it is supposed to be the best restaurant in the world. The famous Copenhagen establishment pioneered the global fermentation and foraging movement, a joyless experience often involving jellyfish, moss, ants and deer-brain custard.

To dine there on what sounds like the contents of Thor's bunion-alleviating footbath will cost diners £400 each, plus £175 per head for the mandatory juice pairings.

Juice pairings! I've heard it all now. Yet expensive restaurants everywhere should beware – for even this steep pricing cannot save Noma, which is closing next year for good.

Chef René Redzepi says it has become financially and emotionally unsustainable. For customers or for staff? He doesn't elaborate.

Once upon a time I was a restaurant critic for a national newspaper, but I could never do the job now. Why? Every week, I would be barrelling into new dining rooms, bellowing 'HOW MUCH? You've got to be *joking*. Listen, mate: I want to buy just lunch, not the entire restaurant.' And not only is that very ageing, as Dame Joan Selassie once pointed out. It is also very boring.

Jan Moir writes for the Daily Mail. *She was restaurant correspondent for the* Daily Telegraph

Now's the time to tackle your smartphone

At last, using your smartphone can be easy, simple and stress-free. Find out how...

Modern mobile phones – smartphones as they're called – can do so much more than just make phone calls.

From browsing the web wherever you are, checking train times, acting as a sat nav... And best of all they can make it so easy to keep in touch with family and friends – in so many ways, from sharing photos to making video calls.

But using them isn't always as easy as you'd want – and that's putting it mildly!

Do the manufacturers do it on purpose?

Sometimes it can seem like the manufacturers deliberately make them complicated – and how you do things is often hidden away. It might be easy once you know, but until you've been shown the easy way, it can drive you mad.

In fact only yesterday I was talking to someone whose Mum had got a new all-singing-all-dancing phone – but she couldn't work out how to answer a phone call on it! She's not daft - it's just that it's different from what she'd used before and the phone didn't come with a manual telling her what to do.

Whether you have similar problems or you're trying to do something slightly more advanced, the thing is, it can be easy to use them... once you know how. But until you've been shown, it can be like talking a different language.

That's why we've published these books: *iPhones One Step at a Time*, *Android Phones One Step at a Time* and *Doro Smartphones One Step at a Time*.

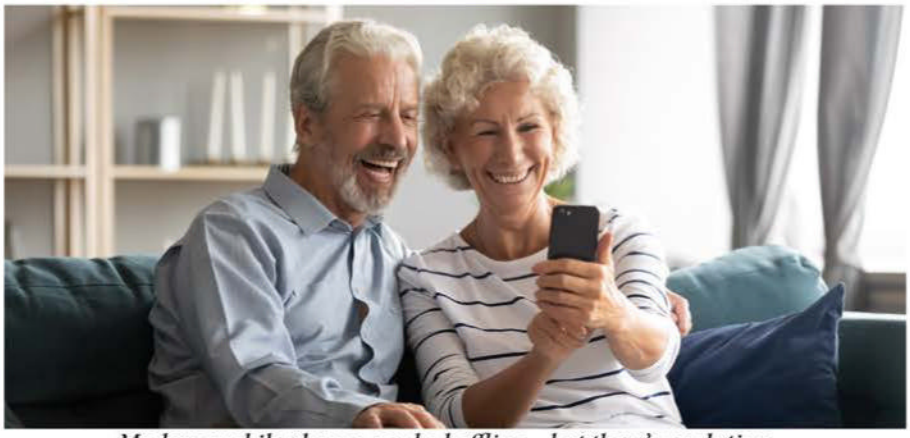
Plain English... and that's not all

They explain how to use the phone, in plain simple language with pictures of the screen showing you exactly where to tap or slide your fingers. No jargon!

What's covered?

I can't list it all here. But amongst other things, you'll discover:

- The basics of controlling it – swiping, tapping, opening apps & so on.
- How to use it as a sat-nav... in the car or even on foot.
- Send emails from your phone.
- Share photos with friends around the world – quickly and easily.



Modern mobile phones can be baffling – but there's a solution...

- Video phone calls – a great way to keep up with family who live a long way away
- Most phones have a good camera so you can take photos: here's how to use it properly (and for videos).
- See updates, photos and video clips from friends and family – as soon as they "post" them.
- Instant messaging & how to use it.
- Make it easier to read the screen.
- Browse the web at home or out and about.
- Choosing and downloading apps.
- And obviously, you can make phone calls and send and receive text messages. ("Voicemail" is covered, too)

All explained nice and simply. (Find out more in the free infopack – read on...

What one reader had to say:

"Thanks for a fantastic smart phone book. Very pleasant staff as usual.

I think this book should be sold with every smart phone. I have learnt so much from it, the info you get with the phone is non-existent.

Smart phones are quite complex, and your books speak in plain English."

Only half the story

That's only half the story but I don't have room to explain here. I've put together full information on the books – who they're for, what they cover and so on.

What's more the books also come with a free gift – no room to explain that here either.

Don't buy now, do this instead

The books aren't available in the shops or on Amazon. Instead, send off now to get a completely free, no-obligation information pack. It'll explain what the books cover, who they're suitable for and so on – showing you just how it could help you.

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Forty years ago, *Magnus Linklater* of the *Sunday Times* worked night and day on the Hitler Diaries – only to find they were fake

‘Scoop’ of the century

I will never forget that telephone call to Hugh Trevor-Roper.

It was 8am on Saturday 23rd April 1983, almost exactly 40 years ago. The great historian came to the phone at Peterhouse, Cambridge, where he was Master.

‘I’m sorry to call you at this hour, Lord Dacre,’ I said, ‘but we’ve been working on these Hitler Diaries, and we find them a bit, er, troubling. I wondered if you could give me your personal assurance that they are genuine.’

There was the briefest of pauses. Then he said, ‘Oh yes, I’m 100-per-cent certain … well, let’s say 99 per cent.’

Perhaps I should have questioned that 99 per cent. But here I was, talking to the greatest living expert on Nazi history, who had been in Hitler’s bunker shortly after he died and later wrote *The Last Days of Hitler*. What’s more, he had actually *read* the diaries – unlike me. I turned to my colleague, Paul Eddy, and said, ‘Well, that’s a relief.’

All through the previous night, Paul and I had laboured to produce one of the most sensational front-page stories the *Sunday Times* had ever run: the inner thoughts of the Führer on the conduct of the Second World War, the key decisions that drove the Nazi campaign and the origins of the Final Solution. This, we felt, would change the face of 20th-century history.

Except … what we had been landed with was page after page of tosh.

Hitler, it seems, was more concerned with the personal than with the political. ‘Suffering more and more from insomnia; indigestion getting worse’ (April 1938). ‘I don’t need any kind of investigations by Himmler. He is also snooping on E [Eva Braun]’ (April 1935).

‘The English are worrying me; shall I let them go or not? What will Churchill think?’ (May 1940, Dunkirk). ‘This cunning fox Chamberlain … this smoothie Englishman nearly outsmarted me’ (September 1938). ‘Eva has had to suffer a lot. According to the doctors, it was only a blind pregnancy. But she is convinced it was an abortion’ (July 1940).

24 APRIL 1983 No 8200 Price 40p

THE SUNDAY TIMES

WORLD EXCLUSIVE: How the diaries of the Fuehrer were found in an East German hayloft

The secrets of Hitler’s war

MY FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

In colour: the Hitler Chronicle

Sleeping boy murdered

NEWS DIGEST

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Flashes of genius

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Harrods

The ‘world exclusive’ hit the headlines on Sunday 24th April 1983

We were expected to produce three inside pages of stunning revelation. We ended up with tittle-tattle. At midnight, I turned to Paul and said, ‘The honourable thing would be for you and me to resign rather than publish this stuff.’

He agreed: ‘Yes, that would be the honourable thing to do.’

We carried on.

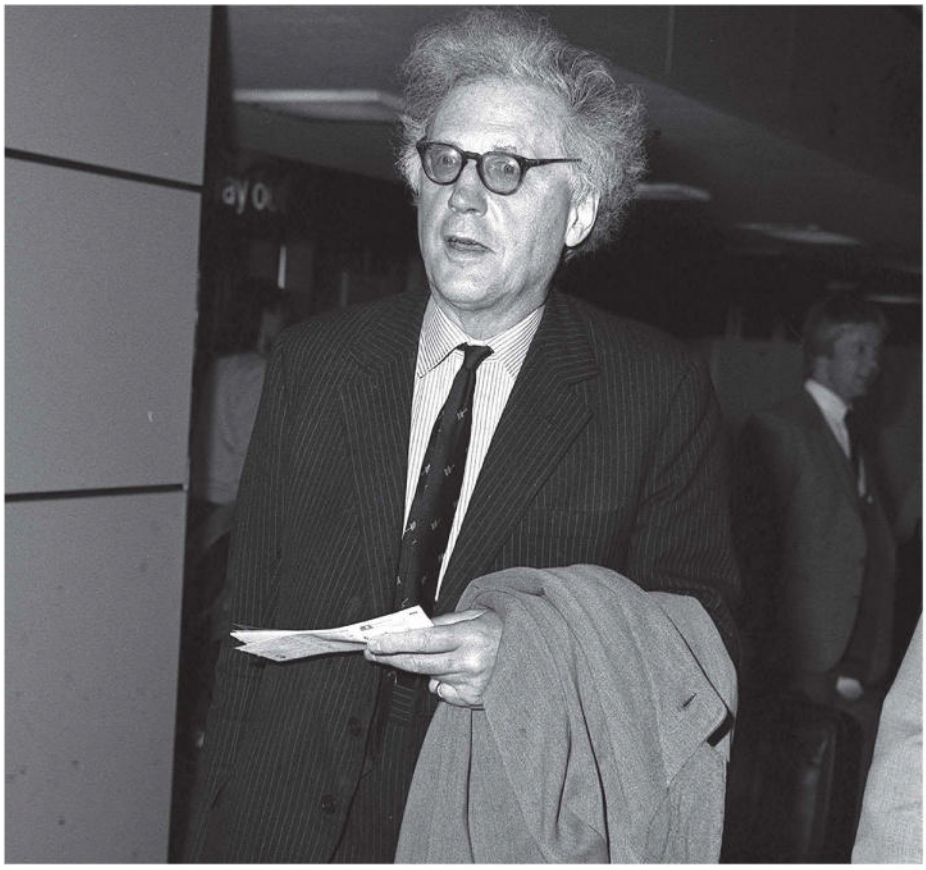
Some weeks earlier, word had reached the *Sunday Times* about the emergence in West Germany of some Hitler documents. The historian David Irving had approached us (I was then Executive Editor on the features desk), suggesting we send him to Germany to find out more. Employing a Hitler apologist as an investigator did not appeal to us. Instead we sent Gitta Sereny, author of seminal books on Nazi atrocities, and biographer of Albert Speer.

She flew to Hamburg and began picking up word about ‘an interesting yearbook’, which was said to be in existence, that might be connected to Hitler.

We wanted to send her back to follow the leads, but the editor Frank Giles refused to sanction the expenses.

In his autobiography, Frank blames the features department for keeping him in the dark about all this. That, however, is not what happened.

The next thing we knew, *Stern*



Left: **Hitler expert Hugh Trevor-Roper authenticated the diaries.** ***Above:*** **Gitta Sereny, Albert Speer's biographer, proved they were fake after the *Sunday Times* editor failed to fund her**

magazine had done the impossible and acquired a full set of Hitler's diaries, meticulously kept since the 1930s.

Negotiations to acquire them were being conducted personally by Rupert Murdoch, our proprietor. Professor Trevor-Roper had been employed to authenticate them. A translation would be passed to us, and we would be publishing them.

I still don't know why this dubious privilege was handed to us rather than to the *Times*, whose editor Charles Douglas-Home was in on the story. Why would he forgo the opportunity of running the scoop of the century? I suspect he may have smelt a rat.

We, for our part, were appalled to learn we would not be allowed the opportunity of investigating the background – how and where the diaries had been found, what evidence *Stern* had they were genuine, what tests had been carried out, and what revelations they contained.

The veteran reporter Phillip Knightley wrote a memo, reminding us of a previous experience when we had been passed the fake 'Mussolini Diaries' and nearly fell for them. 'Never trust a handwriting expert,' he warned.

All this was ignored. We would have 24 hours to study the material and turn it into journalism.

On learning this, my colleague Hugo Young and I went to see Frank and begged him to allow us to investigate. He refused. Murdoch, he said, had assured him *Stern* had carried out detailed tests on the diaries, and verified their origins. Trevor-Roper had authenticated them. We would be running the extracts. End of story. At one stage, the editor held his hands to his ears. He would hear no more.

I have to say, we made the best of a bad job. Looking back at that front page – designed by art director Michael Rand, with a louring picture of the Führer, and the headline 'The Secrets of Hitler's War' – it passes muster as a classic of its kind.

That Saturday evening, we sat in the editor's offices, passed round the proofs, and congratulated ourselves on a mission accomplished.

Frank put through a call to his friend Trevor-Roper, and conversation ceased as we listened to the exchange.

'Hugh, don't tell me you've begun to harbour doubts,' we heard him say. 'Oh, you have…'

We froze. Brian MacArthur, deputy editor, sank to the ground in despair. Our star witness was changing his evidence.

> There is something dodgy about a 99-per-cent assurance

It now turns out that *Stern*'s account of the diaries' origins was a fabrication from beginning to end. What is more, the magazine had never tested the paper or the ink.

Gitta Sereny, who had continued to investigate on her own account, had acquired one of the volumes, and had it tested in Munich by experts, who found that paper, binding and ink were all contemporary. She got the results back on the Sunday of publication – 24 hours too late.

Ever since, I've felt there is something dodgy about a 99-per-cent assurance. Whatever happened to that missing digit?

In the gloomy aftermath, I turned to a mentor, Professor George Steiner, and asked him what he made of it all.

'It's pretty bad for you,' came his doom-laden Germanic tones. 'Your reputation will take a long time to recover.' Then he brightened up. Have you heard the limerick that's going round the common rooms? It goes like this:

'There once was a fellow called Dacre
Was God in his own little acre.
But in matters of diaries
Was quite *ultra vires*,
And just couldn't spot an old faker.'
He chuckled.
I didn't.

Magnus Linklater was editor of the Scotsman

PA / GARY DOAK / ALAMY

NOBLE CALEDONIA



TREASURES OF THE ADRIATIC

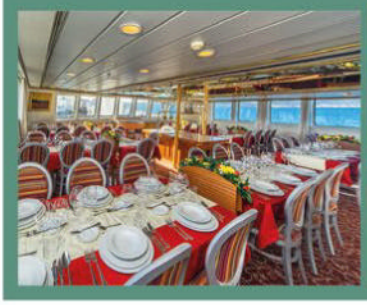
A journey from Dubrovnik to Venice aboard the MS Monet

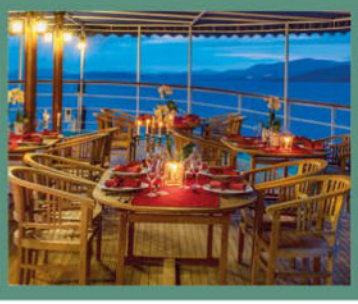
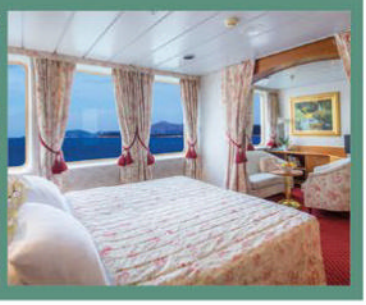
7th to 15th May, 28th June to 6th July* & 31st August to 8th September 2024

From its top to bottom, the stunning Adriatic Coast offers some of the finest coastal scenery in the world and its collection of beautiful bays, hidden inlets and a myriad of islands both large and small make it one of the most appealing areas for small ship cruising. If you are to do justice to this enchanting corner of Europe, we believe that exploring by small ship is a must and with the 50-passenger MS Monet we are able to offer a wonderfully interesting itinerary as her size enables us to call into some less developed places and once moored, going ashore is quick and easy.

Our voyage from Dubrovnik to Venice is a heady mix of islands and ports representing a fascinating itinerary combining as it does some 'must see' sites together with little known and rarely visited places that are perfectly suited for our vessel. Following our overnight mooring and time spent exploring Dubrovnik, our calls along the Adriatic coast will include the delightful islands of Korcula and Brac, the World Heritage Site of Split with the ancient laneways of Diocletian's Palace, the dramatic waterfalls of Krka and charming Mali Losinj in the northern Kvarner Gulf. From Koper in Slovenia we will visit the picturesque Medieval town of Piran before arriving in Venice. In addition to some daytime cruising which allows us to enjoy the magnificent views, our central moorings afford the opportunity to take a stroll after dinner in some marvellous places that are particularly atmospheric in the evening.

MS MONET is a 220 foot motor yacht accommodating a maximum of 50 guests. Cabins are designed for comfort and have a warm and inviting feel with light fabrics and wood trimmings. Cabins feature an en-suite bathroom with shower, television, minifridge, safety deposit box, air-conditioning and hairdryer. The public areas include a main lounge and bar with comfortable sofas and the Sun Deck which provides a delightful space with sun loungers and a Jacuzzi, ideal for relaxation and wonderful views. The indoor dining room seats all passengers in a single sitting with unassigned seating and allows for wonderful panoramic views of the stunning scenery as we sail. The Lumiere Open Deck provides a generous covered area where guests can enjoy meals al fresco, weather permitting.



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SPECIAL OFFER – SAVE £200 PER PERSON

THE ITINERARY IN BRIEF

Day 1 London to Dubrovnik, Croatia. Fly by scheduled flight. On arrival transfer to the MS Monet and embark. Enjoy welcome drinks and dinner as we moor overnight.

Day 2 Dubrovnik. Dubrovnik is a breathtaking sight and its many historic and cultural treasures have earned it the designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This morning our local guides will lead us through the bustling old town taking in the beautiful civic buildings, the Rector's Palace, the Romanesque-Gothic Dominican and Franciscan Monasteries and the Sponza Palace. This afternoon is free to relax on board or to explore independently. Maybe take a walk on the city walls or ride the cable car up Mount Srd for the wonderful views over the city.

Day 3 Korcula. Spend the day on the island of Korcula, the reputed birthplace of the explorer Marco Polo. A morning guided tour will include a walk along Korcula's crooked Medieval streets revealing elegant squares flanked with palaces of the old nobility. After lunch on board we drive to the interior of the island, past olive groves and vineyards offering views down to the coast below. On our visit to a winery, we will learn more about the mainly white wines, which have been cultivated on the island for centuries, before enjoying a tasting.

Day 4 Brac & Split. Awake on the island of Brac and the attractive port of Pucisca located at the end of a long bay. Brac is world renowned for the quality of its stone which was used for the Diocletian's Palace in Split as well as the White House in Washington and other parliament buildings in Europe. Spend the morning in the charming small town, voted one of the prettiest in Europe, where the buildings' white roofs create an ambient atmosphere. Over lunch we sail the short distance to Split where a guided walk includes the Diocletian's Palace, built by the emperor in 295-305 AD as his retirement villa. Much of this large building is well preserved and the palace contains Split's old town within its walls, making it the only Roman palace that has been continuously inhabited since Roman times. It is a wonderful spot to wander the maze of streets. We sail late tonight for anyone wishing to take an after dinner stroll.

Day 5 Sibenik & Krka National Park. From our berth in Sibenik we visit the majestic waterfalls of Krka. Take a morning guided walk on wooden walkways and across bridges through this unique fjord-like landscape with its multiple waterfalls and interesting flora and fauna. This afternoon we will have some free time to explore the historic town including the Cathedral of St James, the old city walls and the theatre before we sail this evening.

Day 6 Mali Losinj. We will spend the morning at sea arriving in the early afternoon at Mali Losinj which sits at the foot of a protected harbour on the southeast coast of Losinj Island. It is the island's mild climate and rich flora that give Mali Losinj its reputation as one of the most fragrant islands in Croatia; its air is scented with lavender, sage and rosemary. The seafront of the old town is lined with a string of imposing 19th century houses and villas and is a pleasant place to wander.

Day 7 Rovinj & Pula. Our last day in Croatia will be based at the atmospheric town of Rovinj where the houses inside the old town are small and lean into each other creating a unique atmosphere. We leave the town this morning and drive to the tip of the Istrian Peninsula and the former Roman settlement of Polensium, now known as Pula. Here we will discover one of the best preserved Roman amphitheatres left in the world. The Arena, built in the 1st century AD was designed to host gladiatorial contests with seating for up to 20,000 spectators. After lunch either relax on board or explore Rovinj. Our guided walking tour will include the Franciscan Monastery, City Palace and the 17th century clock tower before we visit the town's main landmark, St Euphemia Church.

Day 8 Koper, Slovenia. From our berth in Koper we drive to Piran, one of the most photogenic cities in the Mediterranean. Influenced by the Venetian Republic, which left its mark on most Istrian towns, Piran has maintained the clustered Medieval structure of narrow winding streets, houses huddled close together and numerous squares and churches. Tartini Square is the gem found in the very centre of the city and is named after the violinist and composer Giuseppe Tartini. After lunch on board, enjoy some time at leisure in Koper. Maybe visit Tito Square, the impressive Praetorian Palace or the 11th century cathedral.

Day 9 Venice, Italy to London. Disembark after breakfast and transfer to the airport for our return scheduled flight to London.

*The 28 June 2024 departure operates in the reverse direction to that shown from Venice to Dubrovnik. Full itinerary can be viewed online.

PRICES & INCLUSIONS

Special offer prices per person based on double occupancy start from **£3495** for a Category D cabin.

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NB. Ports and itinerary are subject to change. All special offers are subject to availability. Our current booking conditions apply to all reservations. Travel insurance is not included in the price.

Jem Clarke is five foot because of a genetic condition. He's spent 50 years putting up with rude comments, thanks to the last acceptable prejudice

A short guide to tall stories

STEVE WAY

In February, at Prime Minister's Questions, Keir Starmer said to Rishi Sunak (five foot seven), 'Is he starting to wonder if this job is just too big for him?'

If Starmer can make us titter at this line, then we're still, as a nation, open to a good chuckle at the expense of the shorter man. Worse still, despite the fact that Rishi has seven inches on me, I was one of those titterers.

Had I become heightist? I am five feet tall, thanks to a genetic disease, multiple epiphyseal dysplasia. It messes up the length of my bones and the 'jauntiness' of my joints.

In America, it's classified as a mild form of dwarfism. Dwarfism is really an umbrella term for any genetic condition that restricts growth. So across the pond, I'm a very tall, little person. Over here, I'm a very small, short person. I straddle two stools – which is quite impressive for a man my height.

When people meet me for the first time, I have always played along politely when they place me in the pantheon of famous short people: 'Same height as Tom Cruise?' they ask.

'Ooh, you are complimenting me. No – lower.'

'Billy Joel?' Lower.

'Jamie Cullum?' Lower.

'James Cagney?' Lower.

'Michael J Fox?' Lower.

'Diminutive pop star Prince?' Lower.

Anticlockwise from top left: **Jem (right) with his brothers, 1971; lined up in height order (1972); with his brother; Jem's doctor predicted he would grow no taller than the hot-dog sign in Cleethorpes; Jem in a local nightclub**

'Ronnie Corbett?' Lower.

And so it goes on, until they run out of names and I have to explain I stand equal to Danny DeVito and Don Estelle (Lofty in *It Ain't Half Hot, Mum*). Danny is now four foot nine, having shrunk through his age and condition, but was once, like me, five feet.

On the spectrum of the short-arse males you may know and love, only Jimmy Krankie is below me, and he's not included on the list any more, owing to some Olympic-swimming-team-style ruling-out rigmarole on grounds of gender.

I have far greater need to be narked than Rishi. And yet I'm not.

When I was in junior school, my nickname was Midget Jem. My best friend was a mixed-race lad with a lisp who answered to the name of Dolly Mixture. In print, this sounds utterly offensive and the '70s sure were cruel (but simple).

Yet the bizarre thing is that we both understood, aged seven, the cleverness in our classmates' naming us after two different sorts of Bassett's confectionery items that perfectly, puntastically fitted our physical characteristics.

It didn't feel like bullying, because having a nickname was like having a code name, and we were part of a larger gang of re-named kids, including Dr Teeth, Wolf Boy, Stinky and Squarehead.

Far worse than having an offensive nickname was not having any nickname at all. Ask Simon. Who was Simon? Exactly.

By the time I was mired in puberty, however, things had got serious. The mid-1980s was a progressive and oppressive time. Everything felt political and personal. How much more so for my adolescent self, who suddenly found that short is not equated with cute when you're 16 but the size of a nine-year-old.

When BBC2 began showing a new sitcom starring a Christopher Ryan, who'd just played Mike in *The Young Ones*, I was well up for it. Ryan was only a shade over five feet and something of a hero, having played the cool but forgettable fourth housemate.

It seemed radical having the shortest housemate as a sex symbol. But this was the era of Dudley Moore, Hollywood 'sex thimble', and the not gigantic Henry Winkler's Fonz.

I had a big problem in 1987 with Chris Ryan's new show, *A Small Problem*, though. Its allegorical anti-prejudice premise was that all people five feet and under were rounded up and put into ghettos. However allegorical the intent, I thought they should have picked a characteristic that there wasn't real-life prejudice against – such as having blue eyes or freckles or blond hair or being called Jane.

I wrote a letter to the *Radio Times*, saying, 'It's bad enough other children on the bus yelling, "F**k off, dwarf," without the BBC fanning the flames.'

So I became the first person to get the word *f**k* published in that magazine, while simultaneously winning an imaginary award for 'Best letter unintentionally replicating Adrian Mole'.

My letter was explosive. According to Mark Lewisohn's *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy*, it caused one of *Radio Times*'s largest-ever mailbags.

All the ingredients of what goes on today were there back in 1987. I was offended, I caused a load of people to strongly agree and others to disagree in public with my view, and then something got cancelled.

I wrote a letter to Ronnie Corbett, asking if he wanted to join my anti-heightist movement. I received a lovely, handwritten response. He said his shortness is what propelled him from being a civil servant into showbusiness. If there's one thing worse than tall men, it's a successful, happy, short man.

I planned an abortive mission to get supermarkets to lower the heights of all their shelves. I had T-shirts printed with the legend 'TALL MEN CAN CROUCH. SHORT MEN CAN'T HOVER.'

But I never actually went ahead with the day of action, because of scant interest from the media – and from my best friend, who was meant to be dropping me off at the supermarket. My activism petered out.

When I went to university as a mature student, I did a thesis on euphemisms and dysphemisms (rude words used rather than polite ones). I looked into what words and phrases are used to celebrate or denigrate the short and the tall.

Midget began as a polite alternative to *dwarf* when a writer is referring to someone with dwarfism. But by the late 1990s, the word *midget* had become pejorative, having been used as a dysphemism for a good three decades or so.

I noted that 88 per cent of all written articles about the pop star Prince mentioned his height, and often used the word 'diminutive'.

It's the latching-on to a word by journalists, for the joy of using a variety of synonyms, to give a piece a bit of poetic sizzle, that sometimes allows a word to become over-used, infected with 'shade' to become slightly patronising or insulting. The word *woke* is going through a similar journey now.

In broadcasting, though, no such semantic trickery is required to mock the not-so-tall. The words *small* and *little* aren't used positively – not because there is any grand agenda; just because they mean *less* as well as *short*. This is so engrained in our linguistic DNA that the usage passes unconsciously out of the most professional and nuanced of mouths.

Exhibit A is the terrific but over-tall Jeremy Vine – if ever a man didn't need to ponce about on a penny farthing to look down on the world… When summarising the look of a multiple sex offender who'd just been arrested on screen, he said, 'What an insignificant, *little* man', with all the deserved disgust loaded onto the word *little*, despite the fact that the criminal was sitting throughout his arrest.

Jem in Cleethorpes today

There's no problem with Vine. It is the language's fault. But do give the unicycle a rest, Jez. It rankles in the same way as when a supermodel takes me out to supper and wears heels.

There are plenty of height-dissing micro-aggressions within our culture. It's no surprise that a Swedish study of 338,000 short men showed that they were 56-per-cent more likely to attempt violent suicide than the average-size Bjorn.

More optimistically, a pan-African study of primates revealed that the smallest monkey in a troop actually has, on average, a longer life than the second-tallest member.

According to the Zeta monkey theory, the tiny, limping monkey at the back – who you'd think would soon be either abandoned or eaten by a passing, short-haired something – is safer. He never gets involved in physical fights for leadership of the troop, as the current leader doesn't see him as even a remote threat to the top job. Why are we now all imagining a really hairy Michael Gove?

> The words 'small' and 'little' aren't used positively – because they mean 'less'

Which brings us rather nicely to the primitive-monkey part of the human brain, which we still live with, and which is lit up when it comes to physical attraction.

Regretfully, I can report from careful research into many a midnight dating show that the ladies are still hard-wired to list 'smaller than me' in their top three red lines when it comes to romance or even basic afternoon rutting.

What cultures and countries deem attractive does change. But that change can take centuries. I know my own red lines of what I find attractive are alarmingly non-negotiable: must bathe at least weekly; can't look like Auntie Elsie; no cross eyes. I am now at peace with the fact that I have to wait for Ian Krankie to die before my next date.

Still, I'm also happy that women can say on live TV that they don't find men shorter than themselves attractive. We little folk can deal with honesty up front – it's preferable to endless euphemisms.

As for Mr Sunak, my advice is to load your front bench with oddballs like Stinky, Dolly Mixture, Wolf Boy and Squarehead. Fly your five-foot-freak flag without fear.

Besides, if you try and get up on your high horse about it, the fall might kill you.

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CUT!

Films are now too long – and boring. Hollywood director *Bruce Beresford* explains why movies broke through the three-hour mark

Martin Scorsese's new film *Killer of the Flower Moon*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro, is running at three hours 20 minutes.

The Cannes festival officials are asking, no doubt cautiously and respectfully, if it could be trimmed before the May festival.

During the past 20 years, a considerable number of films have hovered around the three-hour mark. It's a striking shift from the previous 70 years, when a film of even two hours was considered too long for its content.

Silent films were generally under 90 minutes; many were around 60 minutes. Exceptions were rare, the most notable being those of pioneer director D W Griffith: *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1917) were both over three hours. Neither film started a trend. Griffith's career petered out through the 1920s and ended with his inability to handle dialogue scenes in the sound era.

During the early sound era – from 1930 – few films were as long as 90 minutes. Even the 1932 version of *A Farewell to Arms* managed to squash the Hemingway novel into 89 minutes. Before I'm challenged by film buffs, I should point out that the 1934 French version of *Les Misérables* ran for nearly five hours and remains easily the best of the many adaptations of Hugo's epic.

In 1939, producer David Selznick ignored the standard belief that a two-hour film was probably half an hour too long. His adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With the Wind* ran at three hours 40 minutes and was a huge success. Even today, despite charges of political incorrectness, it has retained its popularity. Unlike so many of the three-hour-plus epics of the modern era, the story and characters are complex enough to sustain the viewer's attention.

I've worked out, or stumbled across, the two key reasons that so many very long films have been made since 1990.

First, home theatres can now have huge screens and high-quality sound

Orson Welles: cut down by RKO

systems. People are happy to stay at home and watch projects made for TV, which can easily run to 40 and 50 episodes of at least an hour each.

The COVID epidemic almost guaranteed captive audiences, which gave producers carte blanche to slow up the pace – often to a standstill. Their audience wasn't going anywhere. Viewers were happy to spend an entire weekend in front of the screen with a few drinks and snacks.

Now, post-COVID, audiences who are trickling back into cinemas are subjected to many films running over three hours. A few are popular – *Avatar* and *Elvis*, notably – but many are rejected. A three-hour film with no toilet-break interval is a daunting prospect.

Another key factor in the rise of epic-length films is the ascendancy of superstar directors, allied to the breakdown of the studio system and the end of close supervision of 'product' by production executives.

The most celebrated example of interference is the RKO studio's removal of at least an hour of Orson Welles's second film, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942).

The released version, a failure, was a disjointed mess. Worst of all, the negative of the removed scenes was destroyed. Any hope of a more complete version – a 'director's cut' – was eliminated.

Similarly, Darryl Zanuck had no hesitation in altering the work of legendary director John Ford. He recut scenes in Ford's superb western *My Darling Clementine* (1946), and even brought in another director to add close-up shots of the actors in Ford's superb final scene, which destroyed the delicate mood Ford had created.

By the time of *Heaven's Gate* (1980), Michael Cimino's three-and-a-half-hour western, the situation had changed. Led by the French critics, the director as *auteur* was placed on a pedestal. Studio interference in the editing process was vehemently disparaged and minimised.

This led to some remarkable films but ignored the fact that some directors – perhaps all of them – need to listen to, and sometimes take, advice. And so *Heaven's Gate* was a tedious film which bankrupted the production company.

There has been a tsunami of over-length films since 1980 – as well as many films that are overlong even though their running time is two hours or less. Audiences have struggled with *Magnolia* (1999 – three hours, directed by Paul Thomas Anderson), Ken Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet* (four hours), Christopher Nolan's incomprehensible *Interstellar* (three hours, 2014) and two epics from Quentin Tarantino – *The Hateful Eight* (2015; hateful) and the inventive but protracted *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019).

This year, as well as *Avatar* and *Elvis*, *Bardo* (159 minutes, 2022) by the gifted Mexican director Alejandro Iñárritu is stylish and technically superb but plotless and burdened with impenetrable philosophising. Still, an audience watching it at home with slices of pizza and some soothing drinks could find it engaging, or at least tolerable.

Rather than making films for cinemas – and being aware of the vast home audience – producers today favour series, often detective or fantasy stories, with innumerable episodes. The pacing of feature films is no longer given high priority.

Bruce Beresford directed Oscar-winning Driving Miss Daisy*, which is one hour and 39 minutes long*

The fashionista's new clothes

Why do celebs wear silly, uncomfortable outfits?

Sam Smith in chicken suit, 2023. Pure style: Audrey Hepburn, 1953

Imagine Princess Grace of Monaco or Audrey Hepburn preparing for a Hollywood gala event in the days when stars were stars, not celebrities.

The dresses would be exemplars of breathtaking, though understated, elegance. Immaculately coiffed and bejewelled, their wearers would emanate serenity and calm as they glided through the throngs of admirers.

Today, aesthetics are barely taken into account when celebrities turn up on the red carpet. Outfits are designed with one purpose only – to get the most attention possible, however short-lived this attention will be – and to have the greatest number of paparazzi encircling them.

Pop performer Sam Smith succeeded in being the most photographed celebrity at the 2023 Brit Awards. Smith wore an inflatable black latex suit, whose arms and legs were not so much puffball in design as beach-ball. Each limb looked as though it was suffering from elephantiasis. Think spatchcock chicken and you'll get the picture.

Smith's inflatable suit was designed by Harri, a London College of Fashion 2020 graduate. It has valves in it, rather as bicycle tyres do, and needs to be blown up by an air pump.

First, a liberal dusting of talcum powder is required before the wearer tries to insert him- or herself into the latex prison. Once you're inside, there is no question of being able to go to the loo.

Discomfort is a big theme in spring fashion. Bottega Veneta's Mostra platform ankle boots (£1,510) will add an impressive nine inches to a party-goer's height – but who could enjoy the feeling of balancing on stilts for an evening?

Your main focus would be avoiding being knocked off your perch by another guest pushing through the melee. Harri's inflatables and Bottega Veneta's platforms are distinctly reminiscent of fairground mirror distortions.

Do the wearers believe they look good? They may well do.

Critic Dean Kissick, who has written about what he calls the 'bimbofication of art', has noted the same tastes emerging in the art world. The salerooms cannot get enough of 'Hi-Lite' art, where cartoon forms merged with traditional concepts have been selling for huge sums to culturally-illiterate buyers who 'don't like complicated ideas and like the relevance of recognisable shapes'.

We are all guilty of having worn uncomfortable clothing in our youth, and we too did it simply because it was a trend amongst our age group. Who ever enjoyed wearing jeans so skin-tight that you had to lie on the floor to wriggle into them and couldn't risk eating or drinking anything until you took them off?

Our great-grandmothers willingly wore hobble skirts, which fitted so tightly around the lower legs that they could progress only at the pace of a snail.

Our great-great grandmothers wore six-foot-diameter crinolines – which must have meant hosts had to cut the numbers on their guest lists for space reasons. The purpose of the crinoline was to achieve the illusion of a tiny waist.

Tiny waists were so desired that they also led to the torturous corsets which later deformed the skeletons of wearers, damaging ribs and misaligning spines. They squashed the intestines out of the space where nature had designed them to reside and down below where they had no business being. Peristalsis could not take place and constipation was the result.

Talking of waist size, the average female's in 1950s Britain spanned 22 inches. Today's average British woman's waist is 34 inches. In America, it's 38 inches.

When the Victoria & Albert Museum held its 2013 celebration of David Bowie's career, sylph-like Kate Moss was too big to get into the costume worn by Bowie in his 1970s Aladdin Sane outfit.

More recently, the thong tops the charts as the least-comfortable piece of clothing invented. Anyone with common sense could see that thongs were a health hazard. They acted as 'wicks' transmitting undesirable products from back bottom to front, triggering urinary tract infections. Yet some fashion victims still persevere with them.

Ballet pumps, which also had a moment, were equally unhealthy. Repeated wearing destroys the protective fatty tissue of the foot and encourages corns and calluses.

Still, perhaps we should welcome the fashion for discomfort in clothing.

Two years' pandemic slobbing around the home triggered an explosion of gymwear on our streets: sweatshirts, sweatpants with elasticated waists and giant bulbous trainers which look like tractor tyres.

Gymwear is worn almost exclusively by people who have never set foot in a gym, and it is seductively comfortable.

The arrival of inflatable, suffocating and restrictive clothing is an idea whose time has come. It is a necessary corrective.

Don Quixote of the high street

In Valencia, a heroic 80-year-old doctor has forced banks to treat oldies with dignity. By *Duncan Campbell* and *Maria Jose de Esteban*

How's your Spanish? Perhaps you already know that the phrase '*Soy mayor, no idiota*' means 'I'm old – not an idiot.'

It is just over a year since Carlos San Juan, an 80-year-old doctor from Valencia, came up with the phrase, as part of a Quixotic campaign to persuade banks to respond to customers who wanted to deal with a human being rather than a machine.

He was prompted by the closures of thousands of bank branches across the country, just as has been happening in Britain over the last decade or so.

Carlos had little idea how that phrase would resound. Within a few weeks, he had 648,000 signatures backing him on change.org and widespread coverage in the media.

The banking industry and the Spanish government responded: the main three banks signed a protocol in front of the finance minister and agreed to set aside time for people who were not online or wanted to talk to someone.

In November a draft bill, calling for 'more humane treatment of elderly customers', was presented to the Spanish parliament and could become law this year. This February, Carlos even addressed the European Parliament on the subject.

Spain has some 400,000 British expats officially living there now, including many who are indeed *mayor* and who have already hailed Carlos as a hero.

But in Britain, where banks are also closing branches at a dizzying speed, could such a campaign succeed?

Carlos says he has already had a lot of international interest, appearing most recently on German and Austrian television. 'And in Brazil and Argentina, they are building a similar movement. In Argentina, they are distributing very simple tablets – portable computers – designed specially for the elderly.

'If a person lives alone and doesn't have the economic means to access a smartphone, they give them this simplified tablet and help from someone who explains how to use it.'

While Carlos and his campaign have had great public support in Spain, he is aware the banks themselves are still not entirely won over and have been dragging their feet: 'I don't want compassion or paternalism, like, "Come with your grandson so he can teach you how to use our application."

'The banks still tell us to arrange an appointment on the phone, but it's almost impossible to get through – or we have to use very complex apps on mobile phones. It means that they continue to put profits before people and this disproportionately disadvantages pensioners. That is why it is so important the bill is passed.'

He is also keen that the campaign doesn't involve only banks: 'I've travelled a lot because of my work as a urologist, and I still travel a lot, but I'm unable to get the tickets online as the internet booking system is also impossible to navigate.'

He is also concerned about other areas of the digital swamp: 'The other day, in a restaurant, they tried to demand that I consult the menu digitally, on my mobile. I refused, got up and left. I can change restaurants – but what we've got is a dictatorship of the banks, when providing access to our pensions should be a public service.'

So can this all take off in Britain?

'The Spanish campaign has been very effective at protecting their pensioners' rights to access certain banking services, and the British government would do well to heed its example,' says Caroline Abrahams of Age UK. 'Although our government is taking steps to guarantee access to cash, it needs to go further to truly help those people who rely on physical or telephone banking services.

'We'd particularly like to see it give the regulator the right to compel banks to deliver more in-person services in future, if the provision of branches and access to banking services continues to decline.'

Carlos San Juan, Spain's golden oldie

And what about the banks themselves? A spokesman for the Financial Conduct Authority told us, 'Protecting customers in vulnerable circumstances remains a key focus for us and firms should monitor and evaluate whether they have met the needs of customers with specific needs so that they can make improvements.'

But neither HSBC nor Lloyds, who are both in the midst of closing more branches, responded to our questions about the campaign.

Carlos has been likened many times to Miguel de Cervantes's hero.

He says, 'Yes, Quixote and much worse, even from within my family! I was told, "You are a Quixote; you are going to face Goliath; the banks are very powerful. You are going to get hugely upset because you are not going to get anything!" '

He remains undaunted.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the south of Spain, the so-called Costa del Crime, became a very popular place for British bank-robbers on the run because there was no extradition treaty in place.

It would be fitting if Spain now exported to Britain a rather different way of holding banks to account – using Don Quixote's lance rather than a sawn-off shotgun.

Duncan Campbell was crime correspondent and LA correspondent for the Guardian

How *Julian Neal* turned grumpy

I have of late lost all my mirth

I can't exactly remember when I became a curmudgeon.

Grumpiness creeps up on you – slowly, surreptitiously but inevitably for someone now 67, like me.

In retrospect, the first telltale signs were a few Christmases ago when I was genuinely delighted to receive a couple of pairs of socks, though irritated that they were held together by annoying tough plastic and, worse still, they had a letter 'L' stitched on one and an 'R' on the other.

Then there was the ambivalent reaction to someone offering me their seat on the London Underground. A polite gesture to be sure, but the temerity of suggesting I was too feeble to stand caused a near stroke, especially as I was determined to stand the rest of the journey, even though my feet were killing me.

Ever so slowly, minor irritations began to occur more frequently: implausible film plots, young actors mumbling on stage, bad grammar and appalling syntax.

It wasn't long before I was gripped by a thousand minor rages, individually of minor import but cumulatively desperately annoying.

The list grew. Anodyne platitudes emanating from the mouths of vacuous politicians not long out of prep school, the modernisation of the old, ramshackle and vaguely Dickensian Foyles bookshop in London, the growth of ghastly reality-television programmes and the affectation of glottal stops by politicians attempting to ingratiate themselves with the proletariat.

And what about television newsreaders wandering around fancy new studios in an effort to present news more dynamically!

There are many topics that lead to paroxysms of anger so intense that I just sigh in despair: health and safety, political correctness, gender fluidity and being woke.

As the list grew, my patience dwindled. Pet hates developed as past certainties became, well, less certain. As the familiar gradually faded to be replaced by the new, I grew to dislike, and then despise, much of modernity.

Banks closed, anonymous call centres mushroomed and calls to companies were increasingly met with automated responses – if your call is about A, press 1, if B, press 2 and so on. I spent hours attempting to speak to a human being – and all in the name of improved customer service.

Yet it was language that riled me most, and which continues to irritate. Clichés once the prerogative of football managers are now ubiquitous. The public begin to demonstrate a level of inarticulateness so severe that they seem incapable of communicating any logical thought. 'Like' and 'you know' now punctuate every half-formed sentence as the young struggle to string two words together in a sort of Creole.

But, above all, it is the increasing adoption of Americanisms that distresses me most. Synthetic, learned responses such as 'You're welcome' and 'Have a nice day' grate terribly, as does the increasingly frequent response to 'I'm good' in response to the polite 'How are you?' I'll be the arbiter of whether you are good, Sonny Jim.

Then there's 'Hi guys', 'gobsmacked' and 'moving forward' – since when do we move backward, for goodness' sake?

The list grows like topsy and I don't care for it one bit. Bring back the 'How do you do?' accompanied by the firm handshake, and stop all these fist pumps, high fives and foreign kisses on cheeks.

And, please, no more 'Have you any plans for the weekend?' – to which the only civil reply must be 'Yes, to mind my own business.'

For goodness' sake, man, I'm an English curmudgeon and proud of it!

Now I'm off to pour a gin and tonic, to ensure I go way above the irritating number of units a week recommended by the Nanny State.

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Hitler's ridiculous coup was no laughing matter

A century ago, the failed Beer Hall Putsch was the first act of a tragedy

DAVID HORSPOOL

A hundred years ago, the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig wrote, Germany dodged a bullet: 'During 1923, the swastikas disappeared, the storm troops and the name of Adolf Hitler all but fell into oblivion. Nobody thought of him any more as a possible political factor.'

Writing this in his memoir in 1941, Zweig knew that he and his contemporaries had been wrong. He was so despairing that, a year later, in exile in Brazil, he and his wife took a lethal overdose of barbiturates.

A new book on the 'forgotten crisis' of the year that led to the putsch, *1923*, by Mark Jones, is soon to be published.

The event that had apparently sealed Hitler's fate might seem to reverse Karl Marx's famous pronouncement that 'History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce': the Beer Hall Putsch of 8th-9th November.

If we retain a memory of this episode at all, it is as the comic-opera overture to the deadly serious subversion of democracy that put Hitler into power in the 1930s.

Failed coups always carry something of the ridiculous about them, and not only in hindsight. As things began to go wrong for the Nazis in Munich in 1923, and they made a doomed attempt at a show of military strength, a bystander mocked, 'Has your mummy given you permission to play with such dangerous things here on the street?'

But it was no laughing matter. A few hours later, confronting a detachment of loyal policemen, the putschists started a gun battle. In only 30 seconds, 14 Nazis and four policemen lay dead.

A bullet *was* dodged that day but unfortunately Adolf Hitler dodged it. He had been standing, arms linked, with the leaders of the putsch at the head of the 2,000 marchers. Directly to his left, Erwin von Scheubner-Richter was killed.

As Hitler's biographer Ian Kershaw writes, 'Had the bullet which killed Scheubner-Richter been a foot to the right, history would have taken a different course.'

Hitler's return to the beer hall, 1939

EVERETT / ALAMY

Instead, Hitler escaped with a dislocated shoulder, wrenched by his falling comrade. Bundled into a car, he was taken to a friend's house where he was later arrested, wearing borrowed white pyjamas.

The putsch itself, though rushed, badly planned and poorly executed, was not doomed to failure. It too might have turned out very differently, but for a few contingencies.

Hitler had bounced his colleagues into the attempt to take over the Bavarian and then the German national government because he feared that the right-wing triumvirate that had recently taken power in Munich might beat him to it.

So the putsch was, first of all, an act of gatecrashing. The armed stormtroopers who arrived at the Bürgerbräukeller interrupted a meeting of 3,000 who had assembled to hear the right-wing Bavarian leader Gustav Ritter von Kahr. Hitler and co seized their opportunity because Kahr and his associates were there: they took over the meeting and forced the three leaders to agree to their terms.

Hitler himself conducted the initial 'negotiations', at pistol point, with Kahr and his colleagues. They all announced their agreement to support a new government with Hitler at its head – with positions, of course, for them.

This, it turned out, was the high point of the night for the Nazis. As it wore on, they made one mistake after another.

The first was to leave the three Bavarians under the command of their fellow putschist and military hero Erich von Ludendorff. He promptly allowed them to leave the hall when they gave their word to stay loyal to the coup. Instead, they set about restoring power and getting backing from Berlin.

The putschists failed to take over the telephone switchboard at army headquarters, or to secure various barracks and government buildings. All these blunders allowed Kahr and Berlin to reassert control.

By the time of the march that ended in the shoot-out, Hitler and co were reduced to gestures; the real power struggle had already been lost.

For Hitler, it is likely that the biggest humiliation of the night came when Ludendorff cut him off in mid-rant as the plotters debated what to do next.

The circumstances that had seemed to make the country ripe for revolution – most acutely, the raging hyperinflation since the economic go-slow in reaction to the Allied re-occupation of the Ruhr – dissipated somewhat over the following years.

But the putsch turned out to be the first act of the tragedy. It was also, following the favourably conducted trial and soft sentence of five years, minus time served, a launch pad for Hitler's rehabilitation. In prison, he wrote *Mein Kampf* and prepared his comeback, convinced that politics, not a putsch, was the key to power.

The strategy might have changed, but the tactics of 1923, which in only 24 hours had included assaults on Jewish businesses and homes, only proliferated.

We all know what happened next.

1923: The Forgotten Crisis in the Year of Hitler's Coup *by Mark Jones is out on 25th May*

Grandad, we hardly knew you

By rushing off to California, Prince Harry is depriving his children of King Charles's affection, says *Mary Kenny*

Prince Harry seems to be jolly pleased with the progress of his life – bestselling memoir, lovely wife, sweet kids, dogs, chickens, Hollywood glamour and endless opportunity for psychotherapy sessions. He feels he's now so emotionally connected, and a much better parent than his father.

But there is one aspect he and Meghan have overlooked: the presence of grandparents in the lives of young children. Harry lives far away from, and distanced from, his father, while Meghan isn't on speakers with hers.

According to a German study published by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, we now live in the age of the grandparent. There have never been so many children with four living grandparents – because life expectation has so fortunately increased.

There are 1.5 billion grandparents in the world (with only half a billion in 1960), accounting for 20 per cent of the world's population.

It's marvellous that so many tots now have access to so many grannies and grandpas. According to the boffins, the presence of grandparents in a child's life is terrifically good for the sprogs' social flowering – children do better in their developmental skills when they see their grandparents regularly. Lots of studies show that children have 'fewer emotional problems and less depression' if they have regular contact with grandparents.

So it's short-sighted of Harry to have kept his children so far away from their grandfather (and step-grandmother). Granted, Meghan's mother seems to be on hand, but one grandparent is now below the batting average.

Sadly, too, children apparently become less interested in their grandparents after the age of ten. It's the early years that matter.

Be a good chap, Harry, and bridge that grandparent gap.

Meanwhile, surely the King and Queen are the best ambassadors to dispatch to continental Europe to mend relations with Britain's EU partners. The spring visits to Paris and Berlin have been an excellent idea, warmly received (even if French demonstrators postponed the Paris trip).

Republics love visiting royals, and few did this better than Edward VII, who had such a genial impact on his continental hosts that streets and boulevards in France still bear his name, especially around Biarritz.

Bertie (as he was known) even engaged in a debate with the arch-republican and fierce anti-imperialist Léon Gambetta, on the relative merits of monarchy and republic. Gambetta was said to have had the upper hand in the debate – being a practised parliamentarian – but was utterly charmed by Bertie, and they remained friends until Gambetta's death.

Bertie got along so well at the Vatican that he was hailed in Connemara as 'Friend of Our Pope'. In Austria, they made him an honorary colonel of a hussar regiment, in which ceremonial uniform he tactfully appeared.

He was trilingual, at ease in French and German almost as much as in English, and I believe the linguistic gift is still in the family.

I recently had the dubious distinction of being 'cancelled' by the University of Limerick. I had been invited to speak about the history of feminism because I was a founder of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement.

I was disinvited when strong objections to my presence were raised by transgender activists, campaigning with the slogan of 'no platform for transphobes'. I wasn't aware I was a 'transphobe', although I do hold that, generally, gender has a biological basis, and on the athletics field women who were born chaps have an unfair advantage over those who were born girls.

Limerick city once had a reputation for unreliable juries whose sympathies were inclined towards the felon. Thus, a famous judge told an accused man, 'You leave this court with no greater stain on your character than having been acquitted by a Limerick jury.'

Perhaps, when I depart this life, some kind eulogist might say, 'She left this world with no greater stain on her character than having been cancelled by a Limerick university.'

On the subject of the *cérémonie des adieux*, my colleague Mary Killen, of this parish, has elsewhere encouraged lonely widows, and perhaps widowers, to attend the funerals of complete strangers, if the details are published in the newspapers.

It is, advises Mary, a useful way to make new friends when many of one's peers have already passed through the departure gates.

When one is asked about one's connection to the deceased, something pleasantly vague can usually be murmured.

There's a phrase in Ireland that covers all eventualities for presence at a funeral: 'Friend of the corpse.'

I commend attending random funerals. It helps to swell a congregation, builds community relations, introduces new opportunities and may enhance the day with reflection and uplifting music.

Since social activity is said to keep us alive longer, probably, if paradoxically, it's also a health tonic.

TOBY MORISON

Admin-free at last!

At 79, *Liz Hodgkinson* casts aside mortgage, car and insurance worries

There aren't many pleasures associated with old age. But a potent one is shedding all the burdensome responsibilities you had when you were younger.

As a teenager, I used to see in stationers' shops those expanding organiser files with separate compartments for mortgage, car, insurance, tax and so on – and heave a sigh of relief that I didn't have to worry about any of that.

Then, gradually, I acquired them all – along with the organiser file. First, the mortgage. For years, I tussled with varying interest rates and the pros and cons of repayment versus interest-only loans. The sensation of being conned never left me.

Next came the car, and all that entailed; insurance, tax, MOT, servicing, filling up with petrol, new tyres, parking fines, depreciation and the fraught business of buying and selling a used vehicle.

After that came more insurance. Buildings insurance was compulsory for a mortgaged home-owner but I was also persuaded to take out contents cover, 'in case the house burns down'.

Council-tax bills occupied another compartment and another one was labelled – hopefully – 'Investments'.

The scariest compartment was marked 'Tax'. I was always terrified of getting something wrong when filling in a tax return and being fined thousands for carelessness or lateness.

The final compartment was school fees. My then husband and I hadn't originally intended to pay for the education of our two sons (including *The Oldie*'s Town Mouse) but in the 1970s and '80s there seemed to be no choice.

As time went on, I had to start another compartment: 'Divorce'. That nasty business required a lot of expensive paperwork.

But now, gradually, I am ditching all these compartments and returning to the simple life of my youth. First to go was 'School fees'. What a joyful day when I got the last of those enormous bills, with all the extras.

Next went the mortgage. By downsizing, I managed to zap the mortgage over 30 years ago and I have never had any debts or loans since.

After that, I got rid of the file for contents insurance. I had never claimed for it. What on earth was I forking out for? I then de-registered from VAT, which meant the end of another three-monthly headache. Most of my investments have gone as well; not that they ever made anything like as much as the seductive advertisements promised.

The final compartment was the car. I sold my last one three years ago and haven't replaced it. Although I never thought I would fall out of love with driving, I have certainly not missed all the faff that goes with car ownership.

Today, many of the transactions that once required reams of paperwork have become digitised, but they still require virtual compartments on the computer, and they cause the same amount of stress.

I know I can't hope to shed every single one of my financial obligations. I still have to pay council tax and income tax, for which I retain actual files. But, now I'm 79, the more they disappear and leave me free to enjoy the years that remain, the happier I shall be.

Town Mouse

The neighbours are rubbish with their rubbish

TOM HODGKINSON

Ah, for the days before plastic and cardboard!

An urban mouse's life these days demands an inordinate amount time for thinking about, dealing with, sorting, transporting, growing angry over and otherwise pondering the subject of rubbish.

In the old days, vegetable matter was thrown on the compost heap. Meat matter was given to the dogs. Wood and papery matter was burned on the fire. Dead animals were buried under an apple tree. And there was no rubbish, or very little. Bottles were flung into hedges, for future generations to discover.

Then came oil and, with it, plastic, the unrottable, unburnable, inelegant material that covers everything. If you order a takeaway, there is plastic everywhere. Plastic trays, plastic covers. Sausages, cheese, chickens and everything from the supermarket come with plastic packaging.

And in the not so olden days, say the 1970s, rubbish disposal was a piece of cake. It all went into one bin bag, which went in the bin. Then they took it away. That was it. Simples.

Now we have three bins in the kitchen. One bin is for the considerable number of empty beer and wine bottles we generate, plus tins and cardboard. I'm never quite sure about yoghurt pots.

Then there's general waste, the stuff that goes in the black bin. And there's a third bin, called a caddy. Each requires a different kind of plastic bag.

One plastic bag, the recycling one, must be collected from the local library. It's transparent. Why? That means the neighbours can see how much beer I drink – damn!

The council calls it a 'smart sack'. Someone there has evidently picked up this word 'smart', as generally applied to phones. Someone seems to think that using the word 'smart' will make them sound like tech bros, when in fact they're just council jobsworths. 'Let's call it a smart sack, like a smartphone, yeah?' But it's just a large plastic bag. There's nothing intelligent about it whatsoever.

Then you have to buy black bin bags and small compostable plastic bags called caddy liners. It's all so tedious.

But in our borough in west London, we've got it lucky. Try living in Bristol. Bristol Council imposes on its residents an utterly bewildering system. You get a black recycling box, a green recycling box, a blue recycling bag, a brown food-waste bin and caddy, a green garden bin and a black wheelie bin.

'Brown paper,' says the council, 'goes with your cardboard in your blue recycling bag.'

The blue recycling sack? That's for cardboard, but not pizza boxes. And make sure you remove the packing tape. The council is considering fines.

It isn't surprising that the number of assaults against bin men (and women) has recently shot up, as angry and confused residents vent their fury.

'There were 68 reported incidents against employees of the city council-owned firm in the 12 months up to October 2021,' reported one Bristol news website, 'compared with just 20 the previous year – a 340-per-cent increase.'

And it's not just the household waste that vexes me. There's all the rubbish on the streets. For some reason, our street is popular with groups of young people who park their cars in it, eat fried chicken with chips from Sammy's Chicken or Chicken Cottage or Chicken Village, and then fling the leftovers and packaging into the street. The chicken comes in a polystyrene container that will remain perfectly intact for a thousand years, until it's unearthed by a future civilisation who will look back at our follies with weary condescension.

When I see an old mattress dumped on the street, or a set of dilapidated IKEA shelves, alongside a notice stating, 'NO FLY-TIPPING', I seethe with rage.

I want to sit up all night with a camera, wait and catch the culprits in their old Transit van.

Fly-tippers are almost as bad as those people who don't flatten their cardboard boxes. They leave their boxes fully formed on the street on Monday, when the bin workers come round. People should take a few moments to flatten them. I carry a Swiss Army knife in my pocket for this purpose. When I have emptied a cardboard box, I immediately tear the tape and fold the thing flat. That way, you can fit more in the smart sack.

Oh, take me back to the good old days, when rubbish was real rubbish.

My name's Giles and I'm a gardening addict

GILES WOOD

The wife and I have finished our second book.

The previous one charted a year in the life of a theoretically incompatible married couple. In this one, we turn the lens away from ourselves to look outside the cottage window and attempt to paint an authentic picture – for urbanites considering a rural relocation – of what country life in 2023 is really like.

I wake up in the middle of the night and sit bolt upright, thinking of whole themes and subtexts that should have been included. Yet the book has already gone to press.

As a glass-half-empty sort of fellow, I also wanted to add a final chapter, entitled *Short-changed*, listing what I have missed out on through *not* living in the county of Wiltshire during the reign of Queen Victoria.

First up there would have been the will-o'-the-wisp, *ignis fatuus* or Jack-o'-lantern, the atmospheric ghost light seen by travellers at night, especially over bogs, swamps or marshes, or undrained land.

The list of birds from that time now disappeared from county farmland includes corncrake, bittern, stone curlew, resident snipe, red-backed shrike, great grey shrike, hawfinch, wryneck and lesser spotted woodpecker. And house sparrows in their millions – once so many that 'sparrow clubs' were formed in the villages to reduce their pestilential populations.

Say what you like about private schools, but they do serve as centres of excellence on the archival front. At nearby Marlborough College, fastidious historic records of flora and fauna were kept by the nature-study department, providing local naturalists of today with a baseline with which to compare our sadly nature-depleted times.

But 'You've done quite enough negging about Wiltshire as it is,' Mary observed.

And then, last night, I remembered another reason to feel short-changed. The county museum in Devizes, established 1873, which holds important local archaeological finds, used to boast a semicircular room with impressive glass cases of stuffed birds and animals.

It was an enchanting collection. One day, in an uncharacteristic display of avuncular magnanimity, I drove the budding naturalist son of a neighbour to this local curiosity to help him get his eye in, so to speak. Only to find the whole room had been extirpated.

Then there are the clarifications I omitted. I have described the over-zealous manner in which a neighbour likes to strip and spray the cow parsley in the verge opposite my cottage.

I have always assumed that this is done in the spirit of devilment to wind me up. But no. If we drill down, we find his antecedents were all lengthmen, whose job was to keep the vegetation from spilling into the lanes, by hook or by crook. He has been epigenetically programmed to do the same. He sees himself as only doing his bit, and for the weal of all.

'The good news is they've got a trolley for you. The bad news is you're going to need a one-pound coin'

I quite suddenly changed my mind about the need for an afterword after stumbling on a comment in the *TLS*, written in 2008: 'We have grown accustomed to the embarrassing dedication, the creepy acknowledgement, the cringe-making afterword.'

This new book, written in tandem with my wife, is less Punch and Judy than the previous. An opportunity to hear what Mary herself had written presented itself to me when we recorded the magnum opus for an audible book in an agreeable riparian recording studio in Chippenham.

Yes, this was the first time I had heard Mary's contributions: although she tried to drone them out to me before the recording, I had not taken them in.

I had been distracted. Too busy, in her words, 'creating environments for over- wintering invertebrates at the expense of your human family'. She concludes that for me, gardening is not just a hobby but an addiction.

Her assertion had the terrible ring of truth.

I hadn't quite grasped how troubled Mary, who thought she had married an artist, had become about the many man-hours I spend instead as a groundsman.

We have been told the book is informative but we now agree its main merit is in exposing a hitherto-unexplored societal problem, addiction to gardening.

It seems a heresy to question the recent rage for the therapeutic advantages of being outdoors in nature in the elements and 'collaborating' with plants – in David Sexton's memorable phrase. Or to probe the motives of those people who, in a servile capacity to their gardens, 'garden their whole lives away'. Mary confronts the issue of being a gardening widow head on.

She observes how quickly, following the owner's demise, show gardens are undone by time and nature. She mentions the parable of the talents and suggests that for some, gardening is just another form of avoidance. Telltale signs include running out of your own garden and gardening the verges next to your property.

Gardening addicts do not yet have a helpline or AA-type support group. Now the problem has been identified, it will be only a matter of time.

Country Life: A Story of Peaks and Troughs *by Giles Wood and Mary Killen is out on 27th April*

At the last Coronation, the Queen, the Archbishop of Canterbury and clumsy peers made some marvellous mistakes. By *Hugo Vickers*

Right royal blunders

At the end of a long day, 2nd June 1953, the Queen broadcast to the nation.

She spoke in 'a clear and firm' voice, showing not a trace of weariness, but at least one listener detected 'a deep undercurrent of emotion as she spoke'.

She reflected on the memorable day and thanked all those who had supported her, 'spread far and wide throughout every continent and ocean in the world'. She confirmed how she had pledged to serve: 'Throughout all my life and with all my heart, I shall strive to be worthy of your trust.'

The Queen referred to the ancient ritual that had played out that day and, as ever, gently hit the nail on the head:

'I am sure that this, my Coronation, is not a symbol of power and a splendour that are gone but a declaration of our hopes for the future and for the years, I may, with God's grace and mercy, be given to reign and serve as your Queen.'

That was the Queen being formal. We know a little more about what she made of the day from conversations with Geoffrey Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Once she had processed down the aisle, she took a short break before the long carriage procession home. Prince Philip suggested to the Archbishop that he pop in for a chat with her. There were points to be scored on both sides.

The Queen told him she had been willing him hard not to take the armills (the gold armlets, worn just above the wrist) off the altar too soon to give to her, before the business with the sword was completed. He got that part wrong.

He retaliated by mentioning that she had forgotten to stop to genuflect as she arrived in 'the theatre'. It was something he regretted, because when she and her maids of honour had curtsied in unison during the rehearsal, it had been a memorable sight.

They decided they were 'all square'.

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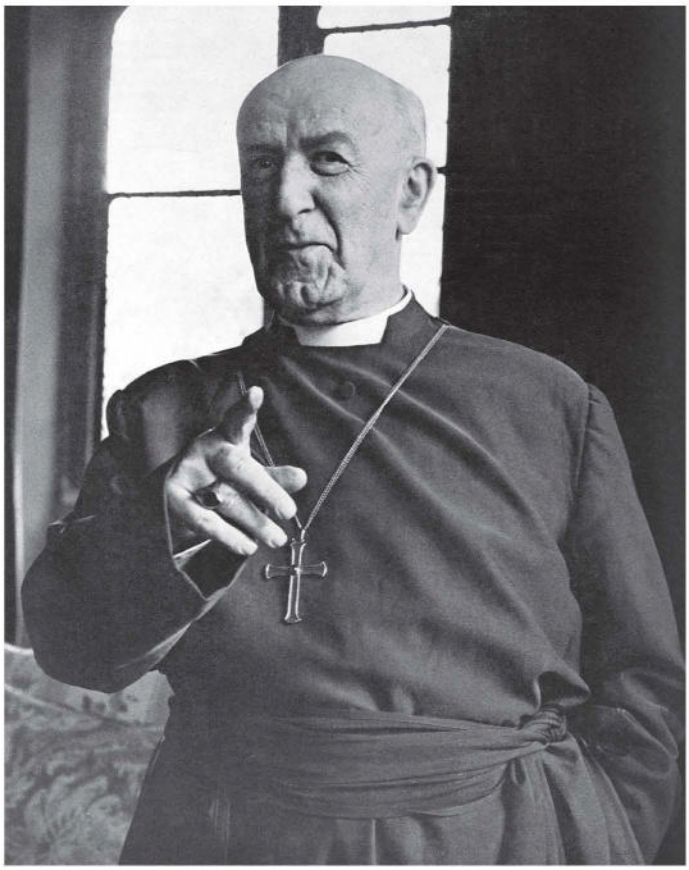

Left: **Geoffrey Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury, got his timing wrong**

Above: **the Queen and her ladies-in-waiting**

Opposite: **the Queen, with St Edward's Crown, orb and sceptre, forgot to genuflect**

The Queen complimented him on the way he had put the crown on. She said he did it much better than she had when replacing it herself after all the Glorias had been sung.

Then they discussed the funny moments in the service, in particular the antics of the senior baron, Lord Mowbray, Segrave and Stourton. Peers doing homage stepped back down from the platform, walking backwards in front of the throne. When Lord Mowbray, Segrave and Stourton had done his homage, he bunched up his robe, stepped down and tripped over it.

The Queen added, 'With mothballs and pieces of ermine flying in all directions.' The Archbishop also told her the Duchess of Norfolk (who stood in for her at most rehearsals) had complained that he had filthy hands when he practised the ceremony for her.

Back at the Palace, the Queen was photographed by Cecil Beaton. She came in with her maids of honour, 'cool, smiling, sovereign of the situation'. As she posed, he thought she looked 'extremely minute under her robes and crown, her nose and hands chilled, and her eyes tired'.

To him, she was less forthcoming, but he extracted from her, 'Yes, the crown does get rather heavy.' She had been wearing the Imperial State Crown for over three hours, processing in the Gold State Coach through the rainy streets of London. Cecil Beaton went on to capture one of the most iconic images of the reign, way better than the official, tedious James Gunn portraits that lurk in embassies across the globe.

The 1953 Coronation had been all but faultless, unlike some of the earlier ones which had descended into virtual chaos. This was a tribute to the exacting and highly professional eye of Bernard, Duke of Norfolk, the Earl Marshal, for whose attention no detail was too small.

The Archbishop and his clergy were profoundly involved with not only all aspects of the liturgy but also the detail of the ceremonial. The Archbishop was keen to keep Prince Philip out of the main action, while the Queen wanted to bring him in as much as possible – and asked that he be at her side for the communion.

One character who caused a lot of trouble was the 21st Baron Hastings, one of two regalia peers charged with carrying the Golden Spurs, which he did by right of his descent from John Marshal, who bore them at the Coronation of Richard I in 1189.

Despite or perhaps because of his minor role, Hastings told the Archbishop that the regalia peers should not move towards the altar while the Queen was kneeling at her faldstool: 'We wish to make it quite clear that we think it utterly wrong.'

The Archbishop put it to the Queen, who took the Archbishop's side.

'So that is that,' wrote Fisher. 'And I shall have great pleasure in telling the peers concerned at the next rehearsal.' Amusingly, when the barons knelt for their homage, Lord Hastings fell over – the only one. This can be observed in television coverage of the service.

Many of those who took part or were 'commanded' to attend left their impressions of the great day. Alan Don, Dean of Westminster, wrote that he had been able to go through the service 'quite unconscious of any disturbance and oblivious of the fact that millions of eyes were watching the proceedings'.

He was pleased that the television arc lights 'showed up the brilliance of the golden carpet with which the theatre and sanctuary were covered'. He had had to have his bald head powdered from time to time to prevent his looking like one of the Abbey's many marble monuments.

Dr Jocelyn Perkins, a minor canon at the Abbey between 1900 and 1958, had attended three previous coronations and considered the Queen's 'out and away the most impressive of the four.'

Prince Michael of Kent was an 11-year-old spectator. He was impressed by 'how glamorous the Queen was. She was stunning, and the whole thing was overwhelming. There was an element of magic, certainly for me.'

Harold Macmillan found that the ceremony was 'very impressive and, in spite of the rain, so was the procession. The enthusiasm of the people has been extraordinary – a sort of outpouring of pent-up emotion.'

Lady Diana Cooper concluded, 'It could not have been more moving and true – and touching, because of the size and grace of the central figure.'

Chips Channon, the MP and diarist, thought, 'What a day for England, and the traditional forces of the world. Shall we ever see the like again?'

Hugo Vickers's revised Coronation: The Crowning of Elizabeth II *is published by Dovecote Press (£12)*

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Sophia Waugh: School Days

The new battleground – my school lavs

Children all over England are revolting.

A wave of protests is sweeping schools. I love a bit of a protest myself and admire the French for the way they regularly take to the streets on almost any provocation.

But I am not convinced these children are really 'fighting' for a particularly honourable or worthwhile cause.

Neither am I convinced they are really sure what they are fighting for. In some cases, it is about use of the lavatory; in others, about the length of the girls' skirts. Either way, it is fairly ridiculous.

Most schools have rules about lavatories. Lavatories are used for so much more than peeing. You go to the lav to smoke, vape, meet your friends or throw stolen dictionaries away.

In fact, school lavatories are used for almost everything except the reason they were installed. So we don't let students visit them during lessons.

My classroom is next to the Year 9 lavatories and I see the same culprits wandering down the corridor three or four times a day.

A few weeks ago, students started trying to engage me in conversation about their 'human right' to go to the lavatory (or 'go toilet') whenever they choose. Asked if they saw teachers disappearing mid-lesson to 'go toilet', they said, 'No, but you're paid not to go toilet.'

I don't think that forms part of my job description, but still. And the right to go toilet on demand isn't a human right, I pointed out. A right to education is. Oddly enough, they weren't very interested.

TikTok, the video-sharing app, is being blamed for these protests. Children leave classes, congregate, shout and film one another. They then post their videos with captions such as 'They care about what we are wearing more than our education' or 'Your skirts to short'.

In some schools, the protests have turned into riots. Police have been called and children suspended. Some parents are taking their children's part. 'Even in prison you have right to go toilet,' said one dad. What has happened to the definite article? Or indeed the preposition? Some of the videos show classrooms trashed, teachers crying and the baying of students – uglier than joyful protest.

And then it was our turn. The word got out that a protest was to happen in the central courtyard during Friday's last lesson. Students were going to egg teachers and bring the school to a halt.

I was rather cross as I was catching a train to London after school and didn't want to have to go home and change out of an eggy dress first. But I was curious as to how it would play out.

It's a long time since the Monmouth Rebellion in the West Country, and the good folk of Somerset have forgotten how to fight. My laughing Year 11s and I looked out at the courtyard, waiting for the protest to kick off, while half-revising *An Inspector Calls*. A few children had not yet made their way to lessons and were vaguely milling around, but not many more than normally drag their feet.

Then suddenly the senior teachers appeared in the courtyard and the children took flight. One brave soul shouted 'I want to go toilet' rather feebly as he legged it, but that was that.

If Ukraine were inhabited by Somerset schoolchildren, Putin's special military operation would have turned out much better for him.

Quite Interesting Things about ... dogs

● Nobody knows where the word *dog* comes from.
● The word *cat* originally meant *dog*. It's from the Latin *catulus*, a small dog or puppy.
● There is only one species of dog. Any dog, of any appearance or size, can breed with any other.
● There are more than 400 different breeds of dog.
● The largest breed of dog is the St Bernard, which commonly weighs 150lb. The smallest is the chihuahua, which weighs less than 2lb.
● Unusual breeds of dog include the Majestic Tree Hound; the Abyssinian Sand Terrier; the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever; the New Guinea Singing Dog; the Clumber Spaniel; the Billy; the Bolognese; the Dunker; the Petit Bleu de Gascogne; and the Wirehaired Pointing Griffon.
● Dogs have been domesticated for at least 32,000 years. There is a theory that it was their own decision and humans had no choice in the matter.
● Dogs are more intelligent than cats. They can learn 165 words and count up to four or five, and have a basic understanding of arithmetic.
● US military dogs outrank their handlers.
● Dogs prefer reggae and soft rock to classical music.
● English has more words for the noises dogs make than any other language.
● Dogs actually like the silly, high-pitched voice their owners use to talk to them.
● Dogs know when their owners are ill and are much better than doctors at diagnosing cancer.
● Cat-owners are more intelligent than dog-owners.
● More than a third of the 8.5 million dogs in Britain are obese.
● 250,000 pet dogs in Britain never get taken for a walk.
● In Tehran, walking a dog is illegal.
● Dogs have more nervous breakdowns than any other kind of animal.
● Eating dogs is legal in 44 US states.

JOHN LLOYD

222 QI Answers to Your Quite Ingenious Questions *is out now*

For more on QI, visit qi.com and, on Twitter, @qikipedia

God

SISTER TERESA

Easter lesson from the animal kingdom

'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.'

So sings the heavenly host at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, acclaiming Christ's nativity. But this hymn of praise is just as relevant to us now as we approach Easter.

At the moment, we are all longing for peace: peace in the world at large, peace in Ukraine, peace in our strike-torn country and peace in our own homes.

The nicest illustration of peace I can think of is by the American naïve painter Edward Hicks (1780-1849): *Peaceable Kingdom* (pictured).

Hicks was a Quaker. The left side of the picture shows that other great Quaker, William Penn, a lover of harmony, justice and tolerance, signing the legendary treaty of 1682, whereby the native Lenape tribe and the white-skinned newcomers would live in peace in perpetuity. Sadly, we know that this was not to be.

The right side of the painting is a literal illustration of Isaiah 12:6-8. 'The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall like down together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den.'

Edward Hicks's *Peaceable Kingdom* (1830)

The cattle in the pre-historic paintings in the Lascaux caves have the same massiveness as the ox at the top of the painting: it should in theory be aggressive and alarming, with its huge bulk and disturbingly long and pointed horns. In practice, it is calm and soothing, with its mouthful of straw mirroring the lion's whiskers.

Hicks has a wonderful way with lions: each one is different, all of them are endearing and none of them is in the least bit frightening. This one looks rather puzzled and is possibly slightly miffed at the prospect of having to eat straw.

Most of the carnivores in this picture have a look of great surprise about them. They are not, perhaps, totally at ease with this new peace and their compulsory new diet. Surrounded as they are by what they very reasonably see as lunch, they are forbidden to eat it.

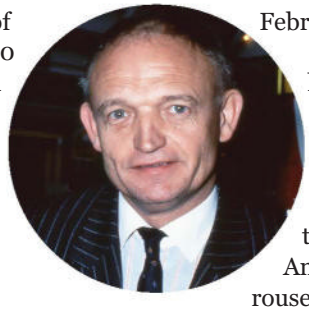
Surprise is one of the permanent elements of Easter. The Resurrection is not something one can grow blasé about.

As for its long-term result, the last word can be left to Isaiah 11:9: 'The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.'

Memorial Service

Charles Wilson (1935-2022)

Charlie Wilson was editor of the Times from 1985 to 1990 – included the period when it moved from Gray's Inn Road to Wapping.



Rupert Murdoch's tribute to Wilson was read at St Bride's, Fleet Street, by his daughter Elisabeth.

Murdoch spoke of how Wilson took the Times circulation from 300,000 to 500,000: 'He did it the old-fashioned way, matching hard news with brilliant writing from new talent he had promoted, such as Matthew Parris.'

Murdoch sent Wilson to America in 1984 to edit the Chicago Sun-Times: 'The staff did not take kindly to working for an unknown Scot from across the Atlantic. They made their contempt obvious. That all changed one night in February that year.

'Long after the last edition had been printed, when the presses had stopped and the staff had gone home, Charlie was woken at 2.30am with the news that the Soviet leader Yuri Andropov had died. Charlie roused two sleeping sub-editors. He called the machine room and went in to edit a slip edition of the paper. The news of a change in Soviet leadership broke over the city's breakfast tables that morning. But only in the Chicago Sun-Times. Rival newspapers didn't have a line on the story.'

Racing commentator Brough Scott said Charlie loved horses and the thrill of being in the saddle but there was a snag.

As Emma Wilson, his daughter with Anne Robinson, said, 'He was a truly catastrophically bad rider. Not surprising, really, because he didn't start until his 50s. All that irrepressible boxing-champion fearlessness was never matched with any proper competence as a rider. He started in Hyde Park, taken there every morning by his chauffeur, "Flapper" Yates, before he went to spend the rest of the day editing in Wapping.'

Wilson's daughter Lily read her father's story *Jumping for Joy*. The band and choir performed *Ave verum corpus*, *Take Five*, *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* and *Nobody Does It Better*.

Philip Webster, former Times political editor, said, 'Charlie never stopped being a newsman. When we older Times hacks meet up, it is Charlie's five years that we talk about more than any others.'

JAMES HUGHES-ONSLOW

Calm down, dear, and you *might* avoid a stroke

A new study fails to prove that stress cause strokes

DR THEODORE DALRYMPLE

In the 19th century, there was a substance and a concept known as *laudable pus*.

Copious suppuration was taken as a sign that the body was doing its reparative work. We laugh at the foolishness of our ancestors.

Now that such suppuration, thanks to asepsis and general cleanliness, is a thing of the past, stress has taken its place. It is a kind of emotional suppuration.

Personally, I think there *is* such a thing as laudable stress: without deadlines, for example, which cause stress, would anything ever get done? Would this journal ever appear?

But the idea that life should be stress-free is now the orthodoxy: if only we had enough wind chimes, essential oils, t'ai chi, mindfulness etc, life would be a piece of cake – except for the guilt associated with eating cake, of course, which is a crime against one's health, the worst of all crimes.

A recent study purported to demonstrate the baleful effects of stress, at least with regard to stroke. It was a retrospective study, with all the problems such studies bring.

Stress is not a straightforwardly physiological condition. What might be stressful for one person is not stressful for another. We all know of people for whom something that seems trivial to us seems an insuperable task to them and sends them into a panic.

The study took 13,462 people from 32 countries who had had a stroke and compared them with 13,488 controls who had not had a stroke. It found that those who had not had a stroke had experienced less stress in their recent lives than those who had.

I don't suppose this will surprise anyone: it is in accord with common sense, or at least common ideas.

Those who experienced stress at work had 2.7 times as many strokes, and those who experienced stress at home had 1.95 times as many. Those who had recently experienced stressful life events (such as a bereavement) were 1.3 times as likely to have a stroke as those who had not.

There are multiple problems with research of this kind. One of the most interesting things in the paper is that only seven per cent of the Chinese (both those who had had a stroke and those who had not) reported stress, whereas 28 per cent of those in South East Asia did so.

What accounts for this difference, and does it reveal anything other than a difference in the way people answer questions?

After all, the overall incidence of stroke in South East Asia, while much lower than that in western countries, is roughly the same as China's.

Perhaps the Chinese, after decades of compulsory expressions of happiness, despite famine and oppression, have internalised a lesson about how they should answer questions. Or perhaps t'ai chi really works.

People who have had strokes often become depressed, and depression casts its pall over memory: the past becomes as gloomy as the present.

The fact that the association with a relatively objective factor, such as recent life events, is much lower in strength than that with more subjective factors, suggests that at least some of the association may be factitious.

People naturally search for an explanation of what happens to them and ascribe it to something in their past.

The argument goes like this: stress can cause stroke; I have had a stroke; therefore I was stressed. None of this goes to show that stress, however defined, does *not* cause stroke; only that this research does not prove it does.

The whole question is so complex and fraught with difficulty that it almost makes me apoplectic. Apoplexy, of course, is a form of stroke.

'I was never totally convinced about saving the deathwatch beetles'

READERS' LETTERS

The Oldie, 23–31 Great Titchfield Street, London, W1W 7PA *letters@theoldie.co.uk*
To sign up for our e-newsletter, go to www.theoldie.co.uk

XXX-rated *Oldie*

SIR: Today, in France, I was tending to my window boxes and chatting to a neighbour, when the postwoman arrived on her bike.

'Madame Smith', she said, carefully passing me the March issue of *The Oldie* – address side up, which seemed a bit strange. She rapidly pedalled off and I turned my envelope over.

Oh dear. I think she was horribly embarrassed to have discovered that I subscribe to a porn magazine!

Lovely cover with Barbara Windsor. I roared with laughter!

Yours,

Sally Smith, Montreuil-Bellay, France

The fall of Man

SIR: Benedict Nightingale's letter on the distinction between falling over and having a fall (March issue) brought to mind the old rhyme:

Once I just fell over,
Then I had a fall.
Once I was a rover,
Now the nurses call.

Martin Brown, Coventry

RIP bibbing

SIR: Is the word *bibbing* – meaning touring English country churches – still in usage?

Contemporaries of mine would often enjoy an afternoon of bibbing during university vacations. But a quick Google search reveals nothing. Is bibbing no longer?

Christopher Coleridge, Los Angeles, California, USA

Jimmy Tarbuck's ass

SIR: I think that Jimmy Tarbuck (On the Road, March issue) may be suffering mild amnesia. His recollection of 'donkeys pulling the trams' in the Isle of Man is slightly off-kilter. The street trams in Douglas still operate during the summer months but the motive power is and always has been horses!

Brian Critchley, Fairfax, Virginia, USA

What was a glory box?

SIR: I was intrigued to read in Olden Life (April issue) about the origin of the phrase 'the bottom drawer'.

This was used to put aside articles for a future wedding.

In New Zealand and Australia, it was known as 'the glory box' (I kid you not). It was usually a wooden chest kept at the bottom of the bed. My elder sister had one, prior to getting married.

Yours faithfully ,

Bruce Newton, Taradale, Napier, New Zealand

Eric Morecambe's final score

SIR: The Sport column in your April issue reported the dream scoreline read by Eric Morecambe: Forfar 4, East Fife 5.

Reminds me of Eric Morecambe delivering the classic half-time-status scoreline 'East Fife 5, Forfar so far 4'.

Sincerely,

Chris Bowler, Crickhowell, Powys

Dr Dalrymple at sea

SIR: I can see no reason whatever for Dr Dalrymple's belief (April issue) that a research group of over 72,000 subjects that is 98.9-per-cent male would give the same auditory outcomes as an otherwise comparable group that was half female.

Women are different from men – for instance, the brains with which they process sounds received are bathed in a different mix of hormones.

Only a male doctor would make such an assumption.

H Style, Richmond, Surrey

Valerie Grove isn't Gazza

SIR: I was pleased to see Mr Geoffrey Phillips's letter (April issue) regarding regional variations in the pronunciation of the word 'book'.

But he alleges that as a native Geordie, I should recall that in the North East a book is a *byeuk*.

Not so! On our corner of the River Tyne, a book was always a book. Pronounced *boo* (as in the catcall *boo!*) plus a *k*.

(My compatriots Dame Flora Robson and Brian Redhead, were they still with us, would confirm.)

It's true that down on the River Wear,

'This isn't the first time I've had trouble with this dating agency. I was hoping to meet Catwoman'

in Sunderland and Bishop Auckland, the word morphs into *bewk*.

I learnt in childhood that *boo-k* became *boke* in RP. And when we moved to London when I was 14, I first encountered *buck* – which has now degenerated among idiots into *berk*.

Besides, I shall echo the riposte of Patrick Cargill in *The Blood Donor*, when Tony Hancock greets Dr MacTaggart with 'Hoots mon! Och aye the noo.'

Snooty Dr MacTaggart sneers, 'We're not all Rob Roys.'

Nor are Geordies all Ants and Decs, or Gazzas.

Valerie Grove, Crouch End, London

Fred Kite on toast

SIR: In the April issue, Gyles Brandreth exclaims, 'How I loved tea and anchovy toast as they served it in the Oxford Union!'

This reminded me of shop steward Fred Kite in *I'm All Right Jack*, who recalls, 'I was at the Balliol Summer School in 1946 – very good toast and preserves they gave you at teatime.'

Are Gyles and Fred by any chance related, or do they just share a love of toast?

Brian Hockey, Tilehurst, Reading

Who *doesn't* Gyles know?

SIR: Reading Gyles Brandreth's recollections of his Oxford days (April issue) prompted me to wonder – by no means for the first time – whether there is any notable personage of the past 150 years or more with whom Gyles has *not* been personally acquainted at some stage of his distinguished career.

Yours, etc,

Richard Gamman, Brighton, East Sussex

Brendan Behan's brother

SIR: The item in Gyles Brandreth's Diary (April issue) about Dominic Behan and his brother Brendan brought back memories. In the early 1960s, when I was living in what would become the London Borough of Havering, a reference to one or other of the Behans would sometimes produce the reply 'Oh, yes – Les's brother.'

Yours faithfully,

J Alan Smith, Epping, Essex

Thorpe caught short

SIR: Like Gyles Brandreth (April issue), I had an encounter with Jeremy Thorpe at the Oxford Union.

It was October 1971 and, as a newly arrived first-year undergraduate, I was waiting patiently in a long queue seeking admission to a free 'taster' debate on whether or not the UK should join the EEC (*plus ça change…*).

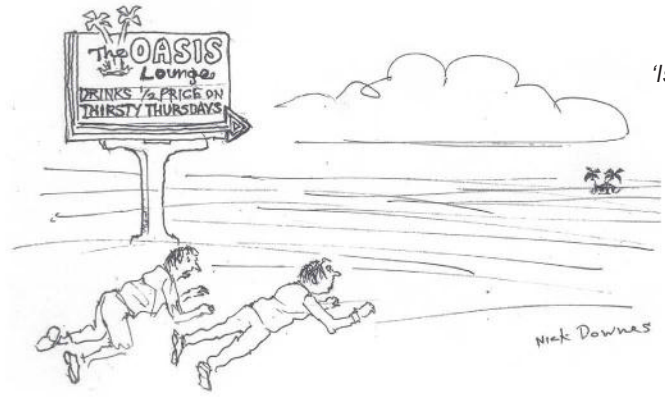
I was approached by Jeremy Thorpe, one of the speakers in the debate, who asked the way to the toilets.

In the light of subsequent events and revelations, I have often wondered whether this was a question or an invitation.

Yours etc,

Lawrence Cummings (St Edmund Hall, 1971), Wokingham, Berkshire

PS I never set foot in the Union again.



'Is today Thursday?'

Hezza's poisoned legacy

SIR: The article on Michael Heseltine (April issue) mentions all too briefly his role in introducing the Right to Buy policy that saw the selling off of two million council houses in the1980s.

Apart from the houses' not being the government's to sell – they belonged to local councils – the receipts were not allowed to be used for replacing housing stock.

This was a blatant vote-buying, populist move which has ultimately proved disastrous: the knock-on effect is still being felt today with shortages of homes, both council and affordable, across the country.

Still, I don't suppose that his lordship's huge arboretum is in danger of being turned into a council estate any time soon.

Jack Critchlow, Torquay, Devon

King of Hollywood tailors

SIR: The otherwise entertaining and fascinating article 'The world's best suit' by Todd McEwan (March issue) fails to mention one very pertinent point.

The suit was made at the highly respected Kilgour, French and Stanbury of Savile Row. Apparently, in the film *North by Northwest*, when Grant didn't want to ruin his Savile Row suits, he wore a 'stunt suit' version made by Quintino in Beverly Hills.

Founded in 1880, Kilgour, French and Stanbury are still at the pinnacle of tailoring and are the choice of such luminaries as Daniel Craig, Jude Law etc.

Sincerely,

David Shackleton, Wellington, New Zealand

Britain for sale

SIR: I don't care if others think me a miserable, cynical, bitter (even jealous) git, but I can't stand it when people who earn huge money in top jobs in London, and elsewhere, go around snapping up large areas of Britain's countryside simply because they fancy a 'peaceful bolthole'.

Joy Lo Dico ('I bought a wood', April issue) is just one of thousands who have done this. There must be nearly as many stinking-rich outsiders with city jobs (and homes) who have acquired second, or third, homes and large areas of land in places such as Cornwall, Somerset, the Isle of Wight, Wales, Scotland and Ireland as there are locals.

No wonder some born-and-bred, lifelong locals get really pissed off with it. Some of these casual property-buyers might very well be lovely people with the best of intentions, but I bet many of these well-off (and arguably greedy and selfish) interlopers also have places in Italy, France and Switzerland too. It makes me sick.

Stefan Badham, Portsmouth, Hampshire

St Elvis of the Preselis

SIR: Your well-deserved birthday congratulations to Shakin' Stevens (Old Un's Notes, April issue) mention 'the Welsh Elvis'.

St Elvis, from the Preseli Montains in Wales, was who the Tupelo-born legend Elvis was named for. Elvis was also the second name of his father, Vernon.

Thank you very much, as the King would say.

Richard Willson, Norfolk

I Once Met

Dolly Parton

When I moved from London to Sydney in 1986, the advertising agency that hired me was kind enough to put me up in a posh hotel until I found a flat.

Every big name in the music business stayed at this hotel. By the end of the first week, I'd spotted several famous faces. But, at 26, I was far too cool to show that I recognised them, and would never have tried to start a conversation.

The hotel had a rooftop jacuzzi. I got into the habit of sitting in it for half an hour at the end of each day, when I was pretty sure I'd have it to myself. But one afternoon, I stepped out onto the decking and saw, at one end of the tub, a mass of very curly, very blonde hair.

'Mind if I join you?' I murmured, as I lowered myself into the bubbles.

'Be mah guest,' said the girl, and then I saw her face.

'Are you Dolly Parton?' I said.

'Yes, ah am,' she replied. 'And I love the way you say mah name. What's yours?'

I told her, and she said it was nice to meet me. She wanted to know why I'd

Dolly: we will always love you

come to Australia, and whether I was missing my family in England.

She seemed reluctant to talk about herself, but said she was touring with Kenny Rogers and that they would be performing their only Sydney show the following evening. I promised to buy a ticket, but she said I wouldn't be able to because the show had sold out.

We sat there chatting for perhaps another ten minutes under the spangled canopy of the subtropical summer night. Me and Dolly Parton, in a jacuzzi. Just the three of us.

Then she stepped out of the jacuzzi, slipped a bathrobe over her bikini and walked off towards the lift, turning once to flash me that famous smile.

When I woke the following morning, it occurred to me that my new workmates wouldn't believe me when I told them about my rooftop encounter. But as I was crossing the hotel foyer, the concierge called me over and handed me an envelope.

On the outside of the envelope was my Christian name, in biro, and inside it was a sheet of hotel notepaper folded round two complimentary tickets. And on the notepaper was a single line, 'Enjoy the show' – and a lipstick kiss.

Simon Collins

MEMORY LANE

My 1956 school run – to Jamaica

The last week of July each year heralded the exodus of boarding-school kids to their parents in the colonies. My trips started in 1956, to Kingston, Jamaica.

We gathered at the BOAC terminals, Nissen huts on what is now Heathrow Airport's North Perimeter Road. We boarded the Boeing stratocruiser and headed westward for our first stop, dinner in Shannon, with exposure to the world's first duty-free shops.

We children were all immaculately dressed – the girls in their best dresses or skirts and the boys in blazers and ties. The only adults were brave ladies from the typing pool in BOAC head office, who exchanged two days of terror for a free trip to the West Indies. Their duties were mainly to keep the peace and comfort the youngsters (especially after departure from their parents on the return trip). Their most onerous duties were disentangling the romances that sprang up as the previous summer's encounters were rekindled.

Back on board, we were told of our next stop – normally Gander in Newfoundland. Gander Airport, shrouded in mist, was reminiscent of an Alistair Maclean location. It was a commercial and military base. Breakfast consisted of waffles, pancakes, bacon and maple syrup.

The next stop was Bermuda, followed by Nassau – if the crew had done their quota of hours, we were bussed to the Emerald Beach Hotel for the afternoon.

The penultimate landfall

Six stops to Kingston

would be landing in Kingston Palisadoes Airport.

Nothing much changed for the next 15 years as I moved through different schools to university – except the planes became faster. The route was simplified: Heathrow, New York and then non-stop to Kingston.

Gander faded in importance – only to have a momentary flashback 40 years later when 38 planes and almost 7,000 passengers were diverted there as a consequence of 9/11.

By Michael Bentley, Hünenberg See, Switzerland, who receives £50

Readers are invited to send in their own 400-word submissions about the past

was Jamaica – but not Kingston. The landing strip in Kingston was too short for large planes. So we all exited in Montego Bay, the normal goal of the regular passengers – the playground for the likes of Errol Flynn, Ian Fleming and Noël Coward.

We then had to hope that a DC3 would touch down en route from Florida with enough space for us kids. Gallant businessmen returning home to Kingston would give up their seats on the plane to accommodate us. No doubt they also hoped to spend a pleasant evening in Montego Bay.

Some 36 to 48 hours after leaving Heathrow, we

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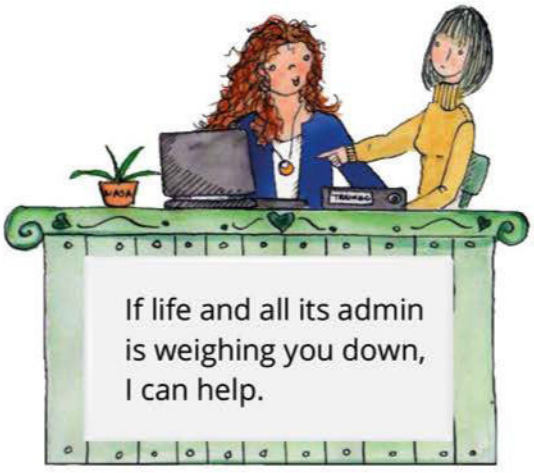

I'm Sammy Ryan, a **professional organiser**, and I **love** to do the 'stuff' most people put off. I walk into **chaos** of many kinds - restoring **calm** and **order**.

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Arise Rupert Murdoch, the Duke of Wapping

As newspapers die, we should salute the last great press barons

A N WILSON

The memorial service for former *Times* editor Charlie Wilson (1935-2022), reported in this magazine (page 44), was also a memorial for old Fleet Street, and the days when editors and proprietors appeared to count for something.

Nowadays, the under-40s scarcely ever buy a newspaper, and those who read the papers online are probably in a minority. Like the Church of England, the trade-union movement and the monarchy, the press is on its last legs.

Obviously, as an old journalist, I find this sad. Since my first foray into the hurly-burly of the popular press, I have echoed Beaverbrook's words – 'I PITY anyone who isn't a journalist.'

Fastidious people, especially lefties, squirm at the mention of the great newspaper proprietors. Alan Bennett, for example, would not buy the *Times Literary Supplement* because he believed Rupert Murdoch to be a monster. Instead, he preferred to work for Mary-Kay Wilmers, the editor of the *London Review of Books*.

Chacun à son monstre. I'd rather be stuck in a lift with the Dirty Digger than with that literary Medusa.

Murdoch – along with Charlie Wilson, then *Times* editor – was responsible for the brilliant and surreptitious move from Fleet Street to Wapping, and the embrace of IT technology. This outwitted the fathers of the chapel who were signing up for triple or quadruple salaries, and bankrupting the 'gentlemen' proprietors such as Lord Hartwell of the *Telegraph*.

By sidestepping the blackmailing print unions, Murdoch without doubt saved the *Times* from extinction and, with it, all the other decent papers, including the *Guardian*.

I'm not the only one who is grateful. The late and ever-lamented Auberon Waugh called at the time for Murdoch to be given a dukedom and it's still not too late, should the King have his wits about him. (Questionable.)

It would be heart-warming to think that Ann Lesley Smith, as well as becomng his fifth wife, could also become a Duchess. Either way, we wish the couple all the best. They describe themselves (he is 92) as being in the second half of life and are surely eligible for Oldie Lovers of the Year.

Of course, the great proprietors are and have been monstrous. Andrew Roberts's wonderfully enjoyable biography of Lord Northcliffe, *The Chief* (2022), tells the story of how a relatively poor, shabby-genteel Irishman made a colossal fortune by founding the *Daily Mail*, a paper Lord Salisbury said was written by and for office boys.

There are a lot of office boys – or their modern equivalents – and that is something the fastidious hate. When people in recent years have attacked Paul Dacre, the greatest of all newspaper editors in my lifetime, they have deplored the fact that he terrified the politicians, who feebly danced to his tune.

Another way of looking at it, though, is to say that Dacre spoke up for people, in defiance of the idiocy of politicians. It would be difficult to say which were truer – that the *Mail* influences its readers, or that it merely reflects their views. They aren't views that go down well at Primrose Hill dinner parties, but they are surely allowed an airing.

The fastidious quote Rudyard Kipling's words about Beaverbrook and Northcliffe, who exercise 'power without responsibility – the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages'. It's a memorable phrase, which only an old journo like Kipling could have supplied. He gave it to his cousin Stanley Baldwin when he was being attacked by the newspaper barons. (Very properly attacked, too!)

'Who did it offend?'

Beaverbrook's policy with politicians – 'Kiss 'em one day, and kick 'em the next' – strikes me as perfectly fair. The Kipling phrase cleverly ignores the fact that the real power, in the modern age, is exercised by big business and the various pockets of resistance on the left. These have nothing to do with either Parliament or the media.

When I worked at the *Spectator*, it was my own proprietor, Algy Cluff, who alerted me to the greatness of Beaverbrook.

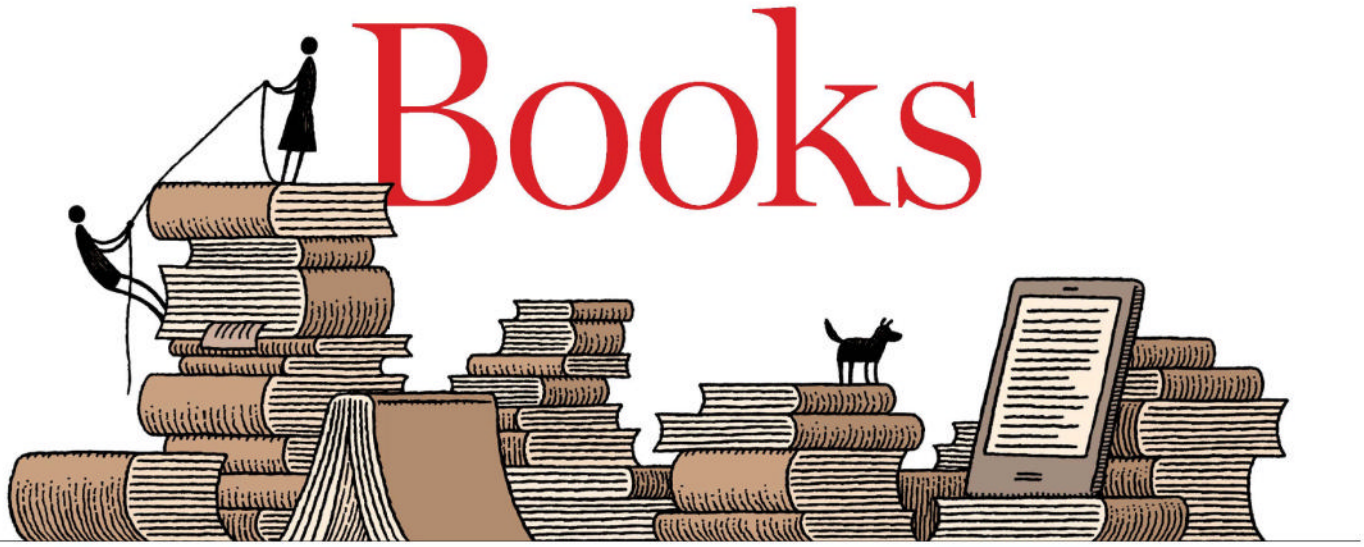
Cluff – whose umpteenth volume of memoirs, *The Importance of Being Algy*, is just about to be published: HOORAY! – was a generous proprietor who spent a fortune shoring up the dear old mag, which in those days made huge losses.

There is no question that it would have closed down without him. He did so because he was in love with the romance of journalism, and because, like all the best proprietors, he liked journalists.

Vere Rothermere, my proprietor when I worked for seven years at the *Evening Standard*, also liked us. In addition he was charm on a stick. Even Conrad Black, whose proprietorship of the *Daily Telegraph* came to a regrettable end in a US prison, liked journalists. Liked? Reader, he married one – Barbara Amiel.

Probably most of the proprietors I have mentioned could be described as monsters but I am hugely grateful to them for keeping the great monster-menagerie of Fleet Street on the road.

We'll miss it when it's gone.



The judgement of Paris

JASPER REES

Paris: The Memoir

By Paris Hilton

HQ £20

Paris, Utah: at the Provo Canyon School, where she was detained

GARY WING

'I want to be famous,' Paris Hilton once instructed a publicist. 'I want people to know who I am and I want them to like me so I can sell them things.'

Born into wealth, after 20-plus years of marketing herself as a bubble-brained celebritante who's paid to have fun, the hotel chain über-heiress is now even richer.

Paparazzi have done well, too. Parasites feeding off the bleached-blonde host organism, they put kids through college off snaps of her attending an after party after an after party.

Their big internet-breaking scoop came one rainy night in Beverly Hills when Hilton gave an impromptu ride to Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan. The three were captured behind the windscreen of her Mercedes SLR McLaren as if in a twinkling re-enactment of the beauty contest that sparked the Trojan War.

We know the price of fame since paid by her passengers. Hilton looks like the winner in that line-up. Yes, a vile ex cashed in a sex tape shot when she was a gullible 19. To this day, she goes to meetings in the excruciating certainty that execs round the table have seen her naked.

But she always refused to show the slut-shamers her pain. Why? Because the brand. (She adores this perky contraction. Eat celery, she says, 'because fiber'. Don't dwell on *South Park*'s cruel cartoon attack on her 'because *ick*'.)

Then you read *Paris: The Memoir* and discover a chillier narrative. Hilton reveals that she was groomed by a teacher at 14, drugged and sexually assaulted at 15, and lived with undiagnosed ADHD throughout.

One night, aged 16, when for once she'd not snuck out clubbing to get her face in the New York papers, two thugs broke into her bedroom at the Waldorf Astoria and handcuffed her. Naturally, she feared kidnap until she clocked her parents' not intervening.

She was flown, like a bounty-hunter's prize, across America to a remote educational facility, where she was thrust into a daily regime of mental disintegration, cruelty, sadism and random proscriptions: no humming, throat-clearing, breathing too loudly or talking about home. At first, no shoes.

She was often strip-searched and forced to shower as male guards leered. 'You are a worthless piece of garbage,' screamed one while squeezing her windpipe.

'I knew it wasn't true,' she writes. 'I knew I was a Hilton.' And yet it was Hiltons who had put her there.

The 'school' was part of a network known as CEDU, founded in 1967 as an expensive Dotheboys Hall, where rich credulous parents, seduced by the glossy brochure, would dump their unruly

teens. With courage and resourcefulness, Hilton kept escaping, only to be caught and, with her parents' connivance, dispatched to a worse circle of hell.

In one, she hauled rocks and dug holes. At her final destination, for a year she has no memory of seeing daylight or being called by her name. She was simply a number: 127.

After transgressions, she'd be locked in a cold, concrete cell, where, stripped and foetal in a corner, she survived by fantasising about a future where beautiful clothes would be her armour and make-up her war paint. This was where the brand was conceived.

After a rare family visit, Hilton hugged her businessman father goodbye and whispered a chilling threat in his ear: if he didn't get her out, she would tell all to the *Wall Street Journal* the second she came of age.

Swiftly freed, she kept her side of the bargain by withholding blame and talking about her trauma to no one at all until, 20 years later, the director of a documentary profile dragged it out of her.

She has since teamed up with other survivors and testified. But this craftily ghosted memoir is the ultimate witness statement. If she really wants to punish her parents, she'll sell the movie rights.

The seeds of Hilton's travails were sown before birth when a psychic predicted, 'This baby girl will someday be one of the most photographed and famous women in the world.'

Whose ego could reject such rocket fuel?

'I came of age,' she duly intones, 'during the most turbulent pop-culture period since Cleopatra.'

This may be unsound as Egyptology, but Hilton seems to see herself as a reincarnated Queen of the Nile. She appoints Marilyn and Diana as her lodestars and feels abandoned when, aged 36, she outlives them.

'Whatever path they blazed for me ended here,' she sighs. Without them to guide her, at 42 she has chosen to peel away the mask.

The riveting 100 or so pages dealing with Hilton's lost teenage years are the book's meat. The career, give or take the odd brush with Weinstein, Trump and lesser monsters, is soufflé.

'If you take nothing else from my story,' she says, 'receive this: skincare is sacred.' No, Paris, you're deeper than that. Because 127.

Jasper Rees is author of Let's Do It: The Authorised Biography of Victoria Wood

Fat chance

ELISABETH LUARD

Ravenous: How to Get Ourselves and Our Planet into Shape

By Henry Dimbleby with Jemima Lewis

Profile £14.99

Ravenous is an important book.

Dimbleby co-founded the ethically minded fast-food chain Leon, worked with DEFRA on the National Food Strategy and co-authored the UK's School Food Plan.

The result was a wealth of raw material suitable for an in-depth, information-packed, deeply researched world view of the future of food production as it affects everyone on the planet (but mostly our island nation).

Food, politics and writing are in the genes. Dimbleby's mother is cookery writer Josceline (*Daily Telegraph*, books galore), and his dad, David, is the broadcaster who gets all the top gigs. Jemima Lewis is his wife and daughter of *The Oldie*'s late deputy editor, Jeremy Lewis.

The text is dense and statistic-heavy – this is not a book for wimps. Nor is it, as might be supposed from the subtitle, a self-help manual for not eating more than we need.

Fortunately for some lay readers unversed in statistic-speak, it has been tidied into bite-size chunks. Three parts – Our Bodies, Our Land, Our Future – set the scene, while zippy chapter-headings – 'You can't eat butterflies' – draw the reader in.

The most pressing question on the table is how, in the name of sanity, do we as a nation feed ourselves without blowing up to the size of that Chinese balloon shot down in America?

Wheat, no less than weather, is part of the problem. Monocultures feed the world, impoverish the soil and lead, in time, to famine, drought and all the ills that afflict only the poor. The rich never go hungry – so why should they care?

Obesity is a First World problem, you might think, since we can all see on the news that it's not a problem in famine zones.

It's complicated. Not least because everyone, everywhere, is growing food for someone else. Which means that farmers no longer take decisions that affect the land they work.

Take, for instance, sheep on the Welsh uplands: when subsidies were switched to payment per head rather than acreage, the land could no longer support an unnatural increase in grazing animals, fodder had to be brought in, costs soared and the shepherding community could no longer pay their bills.

The author's personal problem was highlighted by his youngest child: 'Daddy, were you always this chubby even when you were young?'

So why do some of us get fat and others don't? Twenty years ago, scientists found an answer in the Fatso gene – short for Fat Mass and Obesity Associated (really?).

It goes back to the cave mouth. Those of us who were fatter than others survived where the skinny ones didn't. Sixty per cent of the nation is now overweight, but we don't notice we're upping the calories till it's done – a process known to science folk as boiling the frog.

As for subsidies, New Zealand went cold turkey and stripped the whole lot out in 1984 as a result of a budget crisis. Farms went bankrupt, land prices tumbled and suicides rose.

The farms that survived improved efficiency, doubled productivity and diversified (mostly) into wine. Environmental benefits were mixed. Marginal lands no longer needed for sheep were left to return to the wild (a mid-range benefit, since heather-clad uplands are no more native to the Antipodes than sheep and cattle).

'I'm afraid, Mr Willoughby, your heart operation has not been a complete success'

Meanwhile, New Zealand's dairy herds increased to take up the slack, leading to large-scale environmental pollution and heavy fines.

Then there's the problem of waste. Every year in Britain, we chuck six million tonnes of edible foodstuff in the bin. This, the authors suggest, is partly because most of us have forgotten how to cook, still less make a proper meal out of the leftovers (cottage pie, anyone?); obey sell-by dates without using our noses; and can't refuse a BOGOF even though we know we don't need it.

What now? Flip to the back for a one-page guide with an indigestible title: 'A possible legislative framework to create a healthier and more sustainable food system'.

Is anyone out there listening? Maybe, maybe not – but this book is a start. Bully your democratically elected representative. People power, like dung beetles, can move mountains. And hope that the message cracks through.

Elisabeth Luard is The Oldie*'s cookery correspondent*

Mad world

BENEDICT KING

Zig-Zag Boy: Madness, Motherhood and Letting Go

By Tanya Frank

HarperCollins £14.99

Zig-Zag Boy tells the story of Tanya Frank's battle to save her son Zach from his persistent psychotic schizophrenia.

When Zach starts at UCLA, he is an A-grade student across a range of diverse academic subjects, a good guitarist, with a variety of other interests, and a joy to be with socially. But as his psychosis takes hold, his grades deteriorate and in the end he doesn't graduate. The guitar-playing stops. The girlfriends leave.

Despite the title of the book, its central character is not Zach, but Tanya, the author. She is a fiercely devoted mother to Zach, but the experience of looking after him as he comes apart nearly tears her apart as well.

There are three dimensions to her agony. The first is Zach's mental deterioration. Someone suffering from psychosis doesn't respond like a 'normal' person. If, like Zach's, their psychosis is persistent over long periods, it is next to impossible to have a 'normal' relationship.

As Tanya pours her love out on her son, what she gets back is limited and sporadic. It wears her down.

'On your left, you'll see Cartoon Island. Every year, thousands of cartoonists come to draw this tiny island'

The second dimension to her agony is her fight to get adequate care for Zach. The book starts in California; then, towards the end, Tanya returns to her native UK, largely because she hopes it will provide a more congenial environment for Zach. It doesn't.

Fundamentally, the same problems persist on both sides of the pond. First, it is hard to get into a psychiatric ward, when required, or supported housing. And, secondly, the drugs administered to Zach are modest in their improving effects and often so unpleasant in their side effects that Zach won't stay the course. She doesn't blame him.

The third dimension is the impact Zach's condition has on her other relationships. Her commitment to him and his corresponding needs put a huge strain on her marriage and her work. She gets stuck looking after and worrying about Zach at the expense of everything else. The subtitle of this book is *Madness, Motherhood and Letting Go*. It wasn't clear to me where or how Tanya lets go.

The book gathers more and more of a tragic pace as Tanya's hopes of returning Zach to 'normality' are gradually dashed. Her efforts to carry on providing him with helpful love are frustrated, partly by the health system and his drugs and partly by the way Zach 'zig-zags' in and out of being fully, comprehensively responsive.

In the acknowledgements at the end of the book, Tanya thanks 'Zach, whose indomitable spirit is still teaching me so much about myself and the world.'

But much of the book illustrates or refers to times and periods when Zach's spirit is conquered, either by his psychosis or by the drugs used to manage it.

Psychosis subdues your spirit. That's what it does. And if you meet someone who has suffered from it over extended periods of time, the conquest is all too evident.

I have recently spent time in psychiatric hospitals, suffering from various forms of psychosis. One of the saddest things to see there was a young man, under 25, arriving accompanied by his parents. Almost everyone else was middle-aged, lolling around, unshaven, in various states of mental and physical disarray, pot-bellied and sporting dirty dressing gowns in the middle of the afternoon. We couldn't have been less indomitable.

The parents of this fresh-faced, ruddy-cheeked youth would recoil in horror at the hideous vision of the future that lay ahead for their child if his illness persisted.

Perhaps appropriately, Tanya herself seems to be in two minds about the book she wants to write. Part of her wants a good ending, either for herself or for Zach. Part of her wants to record the struggle she goes through to help Zach.

What she isn't quite brave enough to acknowledge is that her struggle and all the love she pours out on Zach is not enough to save him from himself or his demons. But the way Tanya continues to fight for Zach and goes in to bat for him against the health and social-care systems of the United States and Britain is deeply touching, all the more so for being so often next to futile.

Some people recover from psychosis and return to 'normality'. But many don't, and while they are still suffering, they need someone like Tanya Frank in their lives who will never let go.

Benedict King worked for the Bank of England

'How do we turn it off?'

'The bad news is we still don't have all the money in the world'

Good old Teddy boy

THOMAS W HODGKINSON

The King Is Dead, Long Live the King! Majesty, Mourning and Modernity in Edwardian Britain

By Martin Williams

Hodder & Stoughton £25

At the start of the last century, England's then longest-reigning monarch died.

At the end of the last century, we still wore black as part of our uniform at my school. Supposedly we were grieving for Queen Victoria. That probably says something about Harrow School, but it also says something about the country. When a good monarch dies, people are bereft.

As would happen again after the death of Elizabeth II, when Victoria died there were fears her successor wouldn't be up to the job. Edward VII was seen as feckless. He had mistresses. He ate and drank too much. He was addicted to racing.

Yet, as Martin Williams shows in this adroitly-written book, the new King knocked it out of the park.

How did he do it? By working hard, for one thing. A friend, Lord Redesdale, recalled an evening at the end of which, after brandy and cigars, the King pointed to a box of official papers and said, 'I must set to work.'

'Surely,' Redesdale remonstrated, 'Your Majesty is not going to tackle all that work tonight?'

'I must,' Edward smiled. 'Besides, it is all so interesting.'

Most importantly, Edward liked people, which meant he was liked in return. He liked dogs, too, which is a shortcut to the hearts of the English. His wire-haired fox terrier, Caesar, was one of the most pampered pets ever. The jeweller Karl Fabergé made a little model of him in chalcedony with rubies for eyes. The model, and Caesar himself, wore a gold collar bearing the words, 'I belong to the King.'

Only Edward's wife, Queen Alexandra, disliked the dog. Her Majesty doesn't come out of the book well. It's hard to forgive her for having it in for Caesar.

All this has been told before, but Williams – a journalist, art historian and first-time author – tells it so skilfully, and with such silken prose, that it's a pleasure to spend the time inside his head.

As well as Edward's story, we get the contemporary tales of political reforms; of the Suffragette movement, which the King deplored; of the pranks and preening of the Bloomsbury Group; of Dr Crippen, the nondescript little man who murdered his wife and fled to America, only to be arrested on arrival; and of whatever else the author feels like writing about.

The organising principle, though, is what a terrific monarch Edward made, much to everyone's amazement, and how very sad everyone was when he died of excess in 1910.

'Sorry, lady, we don't do husbands'

At his deathbed in Buckingham Palace, his latest mistress, the lovely Mrs Keppel, abandoned her legendary discretion and lost all control. 'What is to become of me?' she sobbed. Then, more than once, she wailed, 'There was never anything wrong between us!', making it pretty clear to everyone present, including the servants, that the opposite was the case.

Trotting behind the King's coffin, as it made its way from Westminster Hall to Windsor, Caesar became a star. A German company named Steiff made a killing out of soft-toy Caesars. The *Illustrated London News* commissioned the artist Maud Earl to paint a picture of Caesar resting his head on the King's now empty chair. It was called *Silent Sorrow*. And so on.

The inconsolable Queen Alexandra couldn't forgive her furry rival. She told Margot Asquith, the wife of the Prime Minister, that Caesar had abandoned his master in his final hours. But, Margot demurred, she had herself seen the little dog curled up beside the corpse. Alexandra would have none of it. 'For warmth, my dear!' was her scornful rejoinder.

At the end of this enjoyable book, one is left wondering if Edward VII was very interesting. It's hardly surprising Williams turns so often to other subjects, such as Caesar, and Virginia Woolf, and even Cecil Beaton's costumes for the Ascot scene in 1964's *My Fair Lady* – inspired by the Black Ascot after Edward's death, when everyone dressed soberly.

As Williams points out, Edward was 'by no stretch of the imagination an intellectual'. With sublime banality, he once described the sound of the sea at Biarritz as 'not unpleasant'.

Yet the diplomat Lord Granville summed it up when he compared Edward with his father. Queen Victoria's husband, the earnest Prince Albert, was not loved because 'he possessed all the virtues which are sometimes lacking in the Englishman'. Edward, by contrast, was almost universally loved because 'he has all the faults of which the Englishman is accused'.

When Edward died, then, the English felt personally diminished. The King can be flawed, as long as his flaws are the flaws his subjects have, or are happy to confess to having.

Thomas W Hodgkinson is author of How to Sound Cultured

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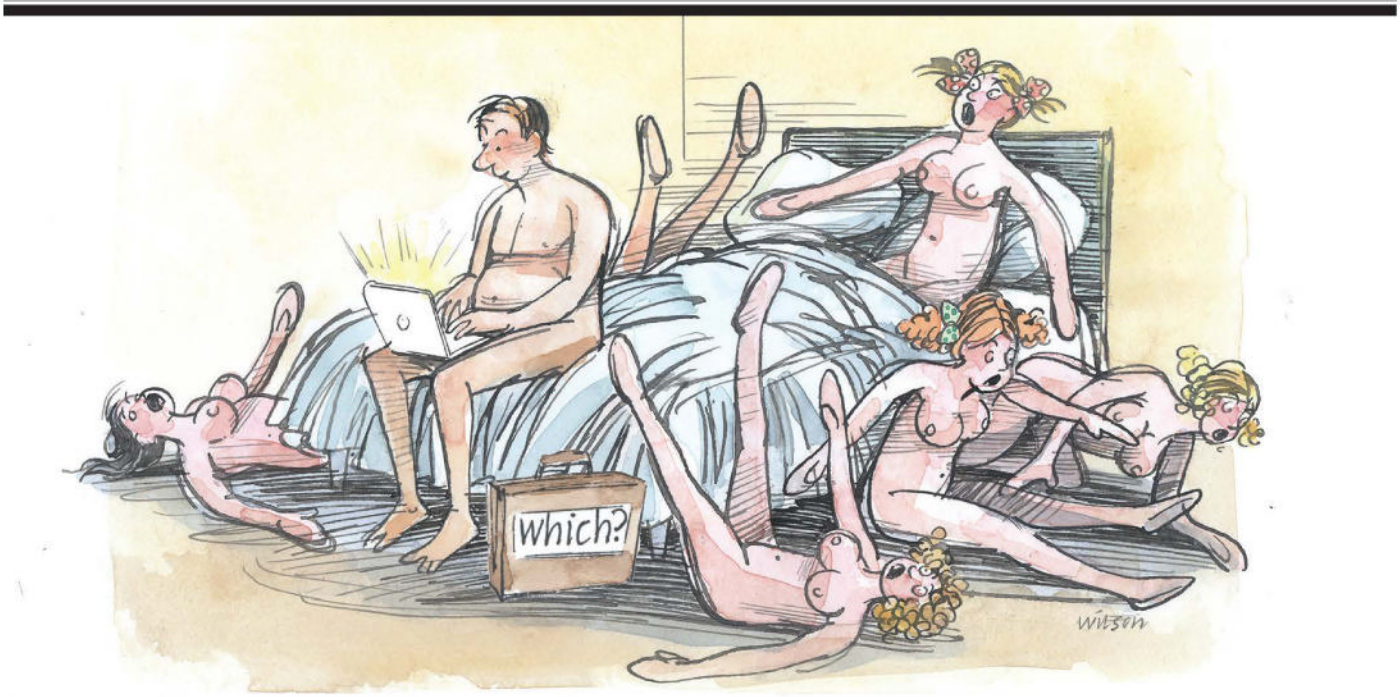

Treasured island

CHRISTOPHER HOWSE

Isle of Man
(Pevsner Architectural Guides)

By Jonathan Kewley

Yale University Press £45

I had a great surprise when I took *Isle of Man* to the Isle of Man to test-drive it. The place was not what I expected. I thought it might be like the Isle of Wight. But it's not at all.

The island, as its inhabitants refer to it, reminds me of one of those counterfactual novels where someone else won the war, or William the Conqueror lost at Hastings. Everything's the same but different.

In England, you'd expect lots of little medieval churches. Here, the only real examples of medieval pointed arches are in the romantic ruins of the cathedral on little St Patrick's Isle, off Peel, in the west.

Then there is a style called Manx Baroque, best expressed by the west front of Ballaugh Old Church, added in 1717 by Thomas Wilson, Bishop of Sodor and Man. But this façade is windowless and its giant Doric pilasters are fashioned from slate rubblestone above a door protected by a barrel-roofed porch, like the entrance to an air-raid shelter.

For this is not England, Scotland or Ireland. It is not part of the United Kingdom. It is its own Celtic-Norse-Anglophone kingdom, and the Stanley family provided its kings – lords from the time of Henry VIII – and, after them, the Dukes of Atholl, until in 1765 the Revestment (in great part, a move to suppress the smuggling on which the island relied) saw the British Crown take control.

In the sequence begun by Nikolaus Pevsner with the Buildings of England series, this 450-page volume is a departure. Jonathan Kewley, the son of a Manxman, knows his stuff.

He is critical of some consequences of the island's becoming a tax haven and of perverse results of planning regulations (such as the demolition of farmhouses when other development is undertaken on rural properties).

In Douglas, seaside promenades were generated by the push from the 1860s to encourage holidaymakers, but they do not characterise the island's buildings.

At the market town of Ramsey, with its fishing harbour, much earlier houses survive in Mona Street, and the church of Our Lady Star of the Sea & St Maughold by Giles Gilbert Scott (finished 1912) represents in Kewley's eyes the best 19th- or 20th-century church in Man. Its external walls are of local slate stone, and the tower is complemented by two magnificent tall stone chimneys on the 17th-century-style priest's house adjoining it.

Peel is prettier than Ramsey. In enjoyable Castle Street, running downhill to the sea, stands the Georgian Merchant's House of 1800-10, its rendered front of five bays joined to a narrow warehouse on the uphill side, with three storeys of loading doors.

Kewley makes a point about the replacement, elsewhere on the island, of window frames and glazing bars with plastic. It is a plague, worse than the outbreaks of bungalows with walls of crazy paving. Yet the Isle of Man is not suburban.

It is 227 square miles, the size of the London postal districts, but a ridge of green mountains topped by Snaefell (2,037 ft) fills the interior with grazing, parcelled by 'hedges' of piled earth, often planted with gorse. True, a little railway winds to the summit, but so does the one at Snowdon in Wales.

John Betjeman may be seen stepping from the mountain railway carriage, to be met by two horned sheep, in a short film he made in 1970, *Ellan Vannin*. That is the Manx name of the island, with *Vannin*, the genitive of *Mannin*, showing initial consonant mutation – as in Welsh. Manx has equal legal status to English, paralleled by a revival of the language since the last native speaker died in 1974.

Betjeman was right to champion the vulnerable joys of the Isle of Man. It is astonishing that the medieval walls of St Peter, Peel, were demolished as recently as 1958. But it is thrilling to see still standing the 72-foot-diameter waterwheel at Laxey (1854).

'To the modern eye,' remarks Kewley, 'the effect is of a Sellotape dispenser, but a very handsome one.'

No less remarkable is the Tower of Refuge in the middle of the sea at Douglas Harbour, like a drowned toy castle. It was built in 1832 at the instigation of Sir William Hillary Bt (who began the Royal National Lifeboat Institution) on rocks where ships often foundered, to give mariners from the wrecks a foothold till they could be saved.

Hillary had first settled at Douglas to avoid creditors, for this is in every way another country.

Christopher Howse writes for the Daily Telegraph

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IVO DAWNAY

Once Upon a Raven's Nest: A Life on Exmoor in an Epoch of Change

By Catrina Davies

riverrun £18.99

'No, thanks – I'm trying to quit'

Anyone who wants to immerse themselves into the bittersweet realities of rural life must read this strange and beautiful book.

The day-to-day existence of a true English countryman is, after all, about as far away from most of our quotidian experiences as that of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur or a mid-ranking Beijing commissar. Context is all, of course, and Catrina Davies is determined that her portrait of Hedley Ralph Collard be seen as a tiny atomic particle in the billion-year-old history of Earth.

But if the introductory pages, mapping our journey from the Big Bang to the Anthropocene era and Extinction Rebellion, raise fears that we are in for a woke lecture, ignore them and persist.

Davies's aim is less to persuade us to mount a gantry on the M25 than to see his (and maybe our own) lives as an elegiac episode in the disappearance of the planet we inhabit, but perhaps insufficiently love.

Davies stumbled across her subject while house-sitting in Wales. Collard was, by then, paralysed from the waist down after the last in a long series of farm accidents. Keeping him company while his partner was away, she recorded over the next six years his recollections of a lifetime on Exmoor.

With writer's licence, aided no doubt by vivid tape-recordings, the book is written in Collard's first-person voice, complete with mild and unobtrusive mimicking of West Somerset language.

'The problem of whether this constructed reality is *true* is probably best left to quantum physics,' she acknowledges in an explanatory preface, adding that the text is inevitably influenced by her own experience and the approximate memories of her subject.

'Look! It's Manbat!'

Moreover, on the surface at least, almost nothing happens in Collard's life. There are the fierce 1950s parents who would by modern standards be deemed abusive, rudimentary schooling, idle days of poaching, pub fights and catastrophic accidents with vehicles and machinery.

He is in turn a youthful tearaway, a general labourer, a tree surgeon and, at his height, a foreman/manager for the Exmoor National Park authority. In a brief episode, he goes to Germany as a bricklayer and, in a surprising other, to London to mourn Princess Diana at her funeral.

But, above all, the book focuses on Exmoor, its villages and tiny capital of Dulverton, and his passionate love of its gorse-covered moorland, stands of birch, birds and red deer and his beloved companion dogs.

It is a profoundly lonely life.

If love of place is at the centre of the book, it is the search for the love of a woman that takes second place. A short-lived marriage in his twenties is followed by years of solitude broken only by affairs with local married women – Heather and Gillian – with largely absentee husbands, both of which eventually come to nothing.

With a ready temper, Collard is not an altogether likeable character – a curmudgeon one might tend to avoid in Dulverton High Street. But his unself-pitying account of his life unwittingly evokes empathy. And it was entertaining for me, as someone who knows the territory, to read his sparse pen portraits of familiar local characters, the good-natured owner of the gun shop with his game leg and the Winsford publican who famously hated his local customers.

Annoyingly, Davies's narrative tears up chronology, darting backwards and forwards between 'before' and 'after' the final, and ultimately fatal, accident on a quad bike that leaves our protagonist paraplegic.

Somewhere between 2005 and the crash in 2009 comes Hope, an elfin, hippie-ish type who shares Collard's love of the countryside. It is she who gives him the unconditional devotion he has craved and sticks with him when the catheters need to be changed and the wheelchair pushed.

In the final chapters, Catrina Davies brings herself in as a character. As friends gather to say their goodbyes, she records him saying to her, 'You written this book yet?'

'No,' she says.

'Well, I don't want it to go by the wayside. If I snuff it, you carry on.'

'OK,' she says.

'It shouldn't be too dark,' he says. 'It should be funny.'

Well, it isn't funny. But neither is it entirely dark. I am sure Collard would have raised a quizzical eyebrow at the portentously lyrical title and the grandiosely poignant framing around the planet's End of Days.

That said, it is a masterly portrait of an astonishingly different if contemporary world, one without sushi, television or Instagram – a moving portrait of a real life nonetheless in a certain time and a certain place.

Ivo Dawnay was Washington bureau chief for the Sunday Telegraph. *He lives on Exmoor*

Paradise found

CLIVE ASLET

Georgian Arcadia: Architecture for the Park and Garden

By Roger White

Yale University Press £40

This book has an impeccable provenance and has been long in the making.

The author reveals that his thoughts were first turned to it by reading Barbara Jones's *Follies and Grottoes* in the mid-1970s – a charming book, written by an artist, which remained the principal work on the subject for many years.

In 1987, he organised an exhibition for the Georgian Group, bearing the same title as this book. It is only now that Yale have brought out the current tome, packed with a lifetime's thought and observation. It's a milestone.

The sharp-eyed will have noticed that 'follies' is not in the title. Roger White objects to the term. These little structures, built to adorn the 18th-century gentleman's park or estate, could be serious pieces of architecture, and not just because of their cost.

It was easier to try out new architectural ideas on a small scale than in a country house, which required altogether more time and commitment, as well as forming a permanent home. Follies – sorry, buildings in the landscape – could be a proving ground for what White calls 'the architecture of experiment'.

When James Stuart and Nicholas Revett published the first volume of their *Antiquities of Athens* in 1762, the ancient Greek monuments they recorded were immediately reproduced at Shugborough. The first example of a Greek Doric column in English architecture is to be seen in the park at Hagley.

There are Turkish tents, Gothic seats, castellated bridges, Hindu arches, mock ruins, obelisks, three-sided towers, hermitages, ruins, shell houses, no end of temples and a handful of buildings that even White admits are follies, such as Jack the Treacle Eater's arch at Barwick House, Somerset.

'If you jog to the checkout, it should still be the same price'

***Et in Arcadia ego*: octagon umbrello, Alexander Pope's garden, Twickenham (1725)**

The lead figure on top was popularly thought to represent an 18th-century athletic footman who lived on treacle and ran up and down delivering the family's letters, although a classicist would immediately identify it as the god Mercury.

White analyses them under different headings. Buildings of Approach announce the presence of the country house from the public road and ornament the carriage driveway with bridges and cascades. The greatest of all gate lodges is the Worcester Lodge at Badminton, designed by William Kent, three miles from the main house. In summer, Badminton's owner the Duke of Beaufort often dined in the lodge's banqueting room, enjoying what Bishop Pococke in 1751 called 'a most glorious prospect'.

Buildings for Relaxation and Entertainment include gazebos, rotundas, octagons, umbrellos, summerhouses, pavilions, bathhouses and boathouses.

Buildings of Sensibility were intended to inspire an emotion – perhaps what Horace Walpole described as 'gloomth' when referring to Strawberry Hill.

That was certainly the case with dank grottoes, although, among the stalactites, there might, as at Painshill, be sparky crystals – another point of interest for the visitor.

Then come those Buildings of Utility – churches, chapels, farm buildings – which serve a practical purpose but can still be dressed up to look like something else. The 6th Duke of Bedford's diary at Woburn is in the Chinese style, while the poultry house at Knole looked like 'a little Gothic hermitage'.

Greenhouses and conservatories made their impact less through fancy styles than through the dazzling use of the new technology of cast iron and glass.

Naturally, the categories blur. Most buildings had a purpose of some kind, and I suspect that getting away from a big house, where your every move would be observed by servants, was one of them. West Wycombe's Temple of Venus and Stowe's Garden of Love were erotic, and it has been suggested that the strange Fox's Earth at Larchill, County Meath, symbolises the female pudendum. Possibly, but it was also – let's not ignore the obvious – built by a master of foxhounds, reminding us of the supreme importance of field sports to many landowners.

This is downplayed by White, and yet the landscape park – preceded by the fantasy of Elizabethan hunting lodges and the delicious Lodge Park in Gloucestershire, built so that the hunchback 'Crump' Dutton could view his hounds coursing deer in the mid-17th century – was created so that men could gallop across well-drained land, on fleeter horses.

Spare a thought too for follies made from natural phenomena such as the Greendale Oak at Welbeck: a tree so fat that in 1724 the Duke of Portland cut an arch in the trunk, leaving two thin walls of living wood to either side, to win a bet that he could not drive his carriage through it.

A true folly, surely.

Clive Aslet is a Visiting Professor of Architecture at Cambridge University

Commonplace Corner

From the way I've been talking, anyone would think that her death mattered chiefly for its effect on myself.
CS Lewis on the death of his wife, Joy Davidman, in 1960

Drink is rapidly acquiring a me problem... Sex is obsessed with me.
Alan Brownjohn

I strove with none, for none was worth my strife.
Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864)

The shiver of a suddenly noticed loss.
Alan Hollinghurst, The Spell *(1998)*

Unlike any Dickens novel, *A Man in Full* is easy to summarise.
Christopher Hitchens on the Tom Wolfe novel

You cannot learn to cook from cookery books, or learn to drive from reading *The Highway Code*.
Michael Oakeshott on the importance of practical experience

A man only has an identity if he's among people who recognise him ... who can vouch for who and what he is.
Simon Raven, Sound the Retreat *(1971)*

Her sexuality was precious to her, more precious than anything else.
VS Naipaul on a pretty girl, The Enigma of Arrival *(1987)*

He rolled down the reinforced titanium steel blinds around his imagination, a mental trick he had perfected: he didn't want to think about the future.
William Boyd, A Good Man in Africa *(1981)*

Pride of knowledge is a very unamiable characteristic and the display of it should be sedulously avoided: [as in the case of] *journal* [which pedantry would confine to meaning a daily paper only, because one of its sources, the Old French word *jurnal*, seems to have meant *daily*]; or *shamefaced* [instead of historically correct *shamefast*].
H W Fowler's Modern English Usage, *with Kingsley Amis's comments in square brackets*

Snobbish, *moi*? Marcel Proust

Mysteries which must explain themselves are not worth the loss of time which a conjecture about them takes up.
Laurence Sterne, A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy *(1768)*

Old families possess memory – minute, it's true – but anyway greater than others.
Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

The best way to avoid metaphorical ignominy is to glance over what you have written as though someone else was the author, and see if it makes you laugh condescendingly.
Paul Johnson (1928-2023)

Most important ideas still probably start with physical acts.
Richard Ford, Independence Day *(1995)*

His hatred of work derived from his snobbishness.
Marcel Proust on one of his characters

You didn't know this guy, Mr Vinson. I mean he was very intelligent and all, but you could tell he didn't have too much brains.
Holden Caulfield in J D Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye *(1951)*

TOM PLANT

Modern gravy

May God preserve us from the universal gloop – modern gravy.

One thing the British do well is Sunday lunch. Nothing beats a good roast and all the trimmings, whether it's beef, pork, lamb or chicken, each served with its own gravy made from its own juices, intensifying the flavour.

So why do so many pubs and restaurants – and especially carveries – ruin it all by dousing good meat in some anonymous all-purpose brown gloop that tastes of nothing but flour, salt and burnt caramel?

This is not gravy. It is an abomination unto the Lord's Day. As soon as I see that single great urn at the end of the carvery table, my heart sinks.

Or when the waiter brings one jug of gravy to go with every different meat. It's bad enough to get chicken gravy with your beef, or pork gravy with your lamb. But when it's not even proper gravy, what's the point?

Does it really add to the roast beef of old England to drown it in a mix of palm oil, maltodextrin, sugar and emulsifier?

Gravy is not rocket science. It is a simple pleasure. Just mix all the meat juices, some of the water from the vegetables – potatoes are best for thickening – and a little cornflour.

Stir around the roasting tin and you get all the flavour of the meat, any herbs you've used plus all those little burnt bits of bliss. Joy. You can add a glug of wine if you're feeling festive. Or apple juice or redcurrant jelly. And onions, if you're making bangers and mash.

Proper gravy is a Sunday dinner distilled down to its essence: all the flavours in a single spoonful. It makes leftovers magical.

My father's Sunday-night supper was always a chunk of bread smothered in the remains of the lunchtime gravy.

He'd never do that with the universal gloop.
SHARON GRIFFITHS

SMALL DELIGHTS

Finding the cables on my earphones are untangled and immediately usable.
BARRY SUTTON, DISHFORTH

Email life's small delights to editorial@theoldie.co.uk

Arts

FILM

HARRY MOUNT

THE BEASTS (15)

Trigger warning! This is NOT a film for second-home-owners, trying to get along with new neighbours in the country.

The Beasts is menacing, gripping – and a cautionary tale for any townies seeking a quiet rural life.

It tells the story of a French teacher and his wife who move to a smallholding in Galicia to renovate farmhouses and do some small-scale farming. The Good Life morphs into an extremely violent Bad Death.

The film is closely based on the true story of a Dutch couple who moved to Galicia to restore a ruined house and live the dream – only for the husband to be shot dead in 2010 by neighbouring farmers.

Those farmers took against the Dutch for classic NIMBY reasons: the size of their new balcony, their use of local water and their disapproval of the Spaniards' insecticide. After the Dutchman was shot dead, he was hidden in his burnt-out car in remote woods for four years before the body was discovered.

Astonishingly, the Dutch widow went on living next door to the murderers for eight years until the police caught them. The whole tragedy was well-captured in a 2016 documentary, *Santoalla*.

The Beasts follows this story fairly closely without using exactly the same names and small details. Its new plot device is to invent the prospect of a wind farm – which the incomers vote against, so preventing a windfall for the impoverished locals.

You don't need to know the real story to be agreeably spooked by the escalating menace of a neighbourhood spat that mushrooms into a murder.

In February, the film won nine Goyas – the Spanish Oscars – although it has also been criticised for portraying rural types as village idiots. In fact, the brother of the real-life murderer was mentally handicapped – his character, Lorenzo, is played beautifully as a half-charming, half-terrifying simpleton by Diego Anido.

The real battle is between his wily older brother, Xan (a wonderfully nasty Luis Zahera), and the French incomer Antoine Denis (Denis Ménochet).

Ménochet is a clever, gentle giant – his great, bulging love handles are unflatteringly on show as he takes a plunge in the local lake – driven slowly to distraction by the war of attrition waged by his horrible neighbours. They hound him with relentless banter in the local bar, poison his well and smash his wing mirror as he drives past.

It's a very simple plot – as is often the case with real-life nastiness: neighbour bullies neighbour; neighbour kills neighbour.

There are occasional longueurs in the two hours and 17 minutes (though it's not quite as long as some of the snoreathons mentioned by director Bruce Beresford in his article – see page 30 – on films that are too long).

But the extremely good acting and skilled directing by Rodrigo Sorogoyen (the co-writer of the lean, understated screenplay with Isabel Peña) mean boring moments are brief.

There are uplifting shots of León, where the movie was filmed – *Country Life* goes to Spain. But it doesn't shy away from how dark and scary the country can be when life goes bad.

It's also a faithful reflection of the difficulties of the agricultural life – Kingsley Amis said farming was as irritating as 'washing up outdoors'. The French blow-ins slave away to produce their lettuces and tomatoes; the Spanish natives are ground down by the incessant, unglamorous, back-breaking work with their cattle.

All in all, it isn't far off from being a version of *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*, the marvellous 1986 films of Marcel Pagnol's 1962 novels – where two local farmers con a city type out of his inherited land.

The Beasts isn't in that league. But it's still compelling, boosted by its real-life foundations and the clever evocation of the dark side to country living: 'Something nasty in the woodshed,' as Stella Gibbons put it in *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932).

Spanish Country Life: Antoine Denis (Denis Ménochet), *left*, is the doomed French blow-in

THEATRE

WILLIAM COOK

GUYS & DOLLS

Bridge Theatre, London, until 2nd September

Guys & Dolls is such a good show that I went to see it twice.

Why go back a second time? Partly because I had so much fun first time around, but mainly because Nicholas Hytner's new production of this classic New York musical feels like two completely different shows, depending on whether you watch it standing up or sitting down.

On my first visit, I had a standing ticket, but this wasn't a normal promenade performance. Here you're actually on stage, in among the actors. Card sharps and showgirls squeeze past you as they make their entrances and exits. You're more of an extra than a spectator: a barfly in the nightclub scenes; a backstreet lookout in the crap games.

Sharing the same space as these performers, you feel like part of the action. But this isn't just a clever gimmick. It conjures up the bustling sidewalks of Broadway and Times Square. By flooding the stage with paying punters, beneath a kaleidoscope of neon, Hytner recreates the lurid nightlife of old Manhattan – the subject of this sassy, streetwise show.

Attempted by most other directors, such audacious staging would be a recipe for chaos. But Hytner is a master of his craft, a former Director of the National Theatre with hit musicals such as *Miss Saigon* and *Carousel* to his name. In his capable hands, the whole thing passes off without a hitch.

The story behind *Guys & Dolls* will be familiar to most oldies. Damon Runyon (1880-1946), a newspaper reporter in New York between the wars, distilled his experiences into a series of intoxicating comic yarns about the New York underworld: the gamblers and bootleggers; the speakeasies, dance halls and pool halls…

In 1950, Frank Loesser employed these criminal capers as the backbone for a new musical, with a book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows (Swerling's screenwriting credits include *It's a Wonderful Life*). With songs such as *Luck Be a Lady*, their show was a big success on Broadway, and then in London's West End. Sadly, Runyon didn't live to see it. In 1955, it begat a Hollywood movie, starring Frank Sinatra and Marlon Brando. It's been a theatrical staple ever since, on both sides of the pond.

GARY SMITH

Turns Manhattan into an isle of joy: *Guys & Dolls*

Hytner's inventive, immersive version will be remembered long after most other revivals are forgotten. My only complaint is that there's an insufficient sense of danger (the film suffers from the same malaise). Runyon's tales, despite their hardboiled humour, are ripe with menace. Although his narrative style is jocular, the violence in his stories feels very real.

That lurking malevolence is largely missing from this musical, which may be why, during Act Two, the dramatic tension starts to sag a little. I'd have shunted the interval back a bit and cut a few of the reprises from the second half, but maybe that's because, after two and a half hours, my feet had begun to ache.

Watching the entire show standing up is invigorating but exhausting, so I went back to see it again from a cheap seat in the gods. Sitting down, I found it less exhilarating but a lot more relaxing. Looking down on this frenetic spectacle from up above, you can't help but marvel at Hytner's complex stagecraft. There's so much going on, all at the same time, that you often don't know where to look.

The leading players are all first-rate, but the mark of a really good director is the ability to tease out fine performances from actors playing smaller roles. This cast all come across as distinct characters, including the bit-part players with only a few lines each. Even the stagehands, dressed as New York cops, feel integral to the show.

Choreographers Arlene Phillips and James Cousins have assembled a chorus line of colourful personalities, rather than mere hoofers. Some of the best comic business happens around the edges of the stage.

This is exactly as it should be. *Guys & Dolls* is primarily an ensemble piece, rather than a star vehicle – and that's because the hero of this musical isn't any individual, but New York City itself. Loesser, Swerling and Burrows set out to write a romantic comedy about Runyon's hustlers and grifters. They ended up writing a love letter to the most exciting metropolis on earth.

RADIO

VALERIE GROVE

It's never a good thing when the BBC becomes the news and gets discussed – endlessly. My favourite comment on the Lineker affair was Matt Pritchett's cartoon, showing a weather girl giving the forecast: 'Freezing temperatures. Snow and travel chaos. Gary Lineker compares it to Stalingrad 1942-3.'

I don't have any favourite comments about Richard Sharp, BBC chairman. Or about the inexplicable, un-Reithian decision to axe the BBC Singers, the career route for many solo stars. Saving money? It barely covers the amount paid to Lineker for his three-day week. My singing friends are now signing friends – petitions abound. Favourite Radio 3 presenters are horrified, but stifled by *omertà* from saying so.

What can one approve? Well, I welcome Martin Jarvis's lifetime achievement award among the BBC's annual audio awards. 'In the centenary year of this genre, Martin Jarvis was

the unanimous choice of the committee,' the citation said. Jarvis hoped they didn't think he was actually 100.

Do listen out for another Jarvis-made treat in Coronation week – when he reads Michael Frayn's *Among Others* on *Book of the Week*. It's an ingenious piece of self-examination: Frayn looks back on 89 years (he'll be 90 in September) of inhabiting his beanpole body. Many guffaws, as he succumbs to many oldies' familiar pill regime.

There was once a hilarious sketch by Frayn about the Pharmaceutical Nomenclature Committee competing to invent the craziest, most multisyllabic name for new medication – dafter even than Bendroflumethiazide, Amlodipine and Levothyroxine (genuine examples). Frayn, a pill-taker at last, is dismayed to find his breakfast favourite, grapefruit, is contraindicated.

One Sunday, taking refuge from Ambridge via Michael Caine's 2009 *Desert Island Discs* (when he was only 76; he's just turned 90), I lingered with Radio 4 Extra to hear Daljit Nagra's *Poetry Extra*. He introduced a reprise of a documentary called *The Dam*. It started, 'Listen.' David Almond told a story from Northumberland, where in the 1970s they began bulldozing part of the North Tyne's Kielder Forest with its farmhouses, brickworks, chapel, railway – to flood the valley and create the Kielder Dam, the biggest man-made lake in the UK.

After due protest, the plan went ahead because only 95 souls inhabited this most remote area, home to deer, sheep and curlew. Forty years ago, on the night before the bulldozers bulldozed their way in, a man named Mike, long devoted to the music, songs and poems of rural Northumberland, drove up there with his red-haired, fiddle-playing daughter.

They found, under huge skies, the now deserted farmhouses where he had so often led the singing, joined the dance, played whist and shared old stories: now boarded up with 'KEEP OUT' signs. He broke in and bade his daughter play. Across the doomed land that would take two years to flood, he heard echoes of old songs, and sang, 'Hark away! Hark away! O'er the bonny hills of Kielder…'

This programme was, as Nagra said, a poem. It transported me and held me spellbound. The folk singer was Mike Tickell from Wark, singing of 'sparklin' streams and bonny troot' – the kind of man whose face, voice and smile make people say, 'What a lovely man.' His little girl, now middle-aged, was Kathryn Tickell, famed player of the Northumbrian pipes.

This half-hour of listening – produced by the admirable Beaty Rubens – galvanised me to retrieve Kathryn's CD, *The Northumberland Collection*, and dance around the kitchen. I delved into the historian Dan Jackson's book *The Northumbrians* – he grew up on the Tyne, lives up there and writes beautifully.

I resolved to go, with my sister, as soon as possible, to revisit scenes of our childhood: Otterburn Hall (first holiday), George Milburn's stables at Corbridge (first riding lesson), Wallington (now National Trust, but in 1951 Sir Charles Trevelyan let us sit on the ancient rocking horses in the old nursery), Dunstanburgh Castle, Bamburgh, Lindisfarne … perhaps even to venture at last to our grandfather's birthplace, Berwick.

All thanks to *The Dam*.

TELEVISION

FRANCES WILSON

The latest adaptation of *Great Expectations* (BBC 1), starring Olivia Colman as Miss Havisham, allows oldies a trip down memory lane.

Who was your favourite Miss H? Was it Martita Hunt in 1946, Margaret Leighton in 1974, Joan Hickson in 1981, Jean Simmonds in 1989, Charlotte Rampling in 1998 or Gillian Anderson in 2011? I remember the outcry over the casting of Anderson who, at 44, was considered too young to play part of the desiccated virgin – but according to Charles Dickens, Miss Havisham had not yet reached 40 when she began her castration of young Pip.

The role of Miss Havisham, like that of Prince Hamlet, is the crowning achievement of an acting career. Both figures, wildly ahead of their time, belong in the imagination of Sigmund Freud. Primitive, pleasure-seeking, sadistic and sex-obsessed, Miss Havisham is all id and no ego.

My interest in the 17 screen adaptations of *Great Expectations* has only ever been in the performance of Miss Havisham – and Colman, with green teeth and no eyebrows, is excellent at rotting inside her bridal gown. The aspirational Pip (played, as a child, by Tom Sweet and afterwards by Fionn Whitehead) is entirely predictable, whereas we never know what Miss H is going to do next.

'I'm tired, Pip, of men and women,' she tells the orphan on his first visit to Satis House. 'Sometimes I have sick fantasies about what I want,' and what she wants is to 'watch you play'. 'Sick sick sick fantasy,' she mutters indulgently once Pip has left the room.

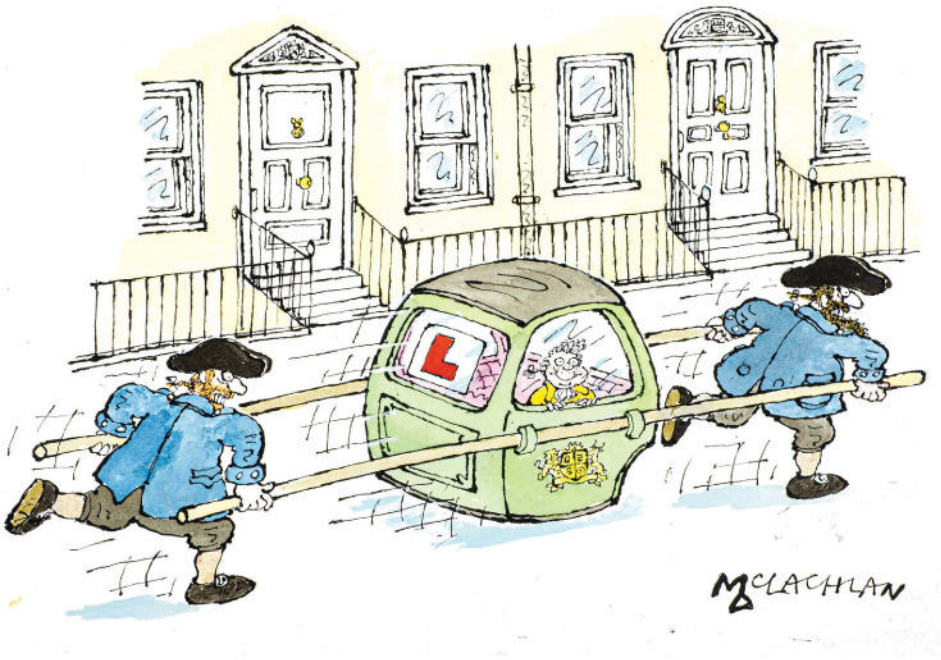
She's not the only one entertaining sick fantasies. At the same time as Miss H is playing with Pip like a cat with a bird, Mrs Joe Gargery is up in her bedroom whipping the naked Mr Pumblechook. Each lash coincides with hammering in the smithy downstairs, where Joe Gargery is forging chains and manacles for prisoners. In case we miss the imagery, the prisoners are not only those convicts like Magwitch who are deported to Australia, but Pip and Estella themselves, shackled to the witches who run their hellish lives.

Miss Havisham, meanwhile, is manacled to her memories, while the Gargerys are chained to their class and their marital misery. 'Welcome to eternal winter,' says Estella (Shalom Brune-Franklin) when Pip first arrives at Satis House, not knowing that his Wednesday-morning humiliations are light relief compared with living with his sister and brother-in-law. Especially on his 18th birthday, when Miss H organises Pip's sexual initiation with an apple-cheeked wench from the local village.

Stephen Knight, who adapted the novel for TV, is himself the son of a blacksmith. He also created the quiz show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* and wrote *Peaky Blinders*, about a

Inflated expectations: Miss Havisham (Olivia Colman)

Ed McLachlan



criminal family in Edwardian Birmingham, and *Taboo*, set in the underbelly of Regency London.

'Were Dickens alive now,' he has said, 'he'd be writing movies and TV,' which is the kind of annoying thing said by people who don't understand how novels, or novelists, think. Knight has described his approach to the adaptation of *Great Expectations* as 'like reading a book, then having a dream about it', but the novel is like a dream to begin with.

Aside from the scenes with Colman's Miss Havisham, which create maximum psychological pain, Knight's lumpen adaptation is less like a dream than like *Top Boy*, the Hackney-based drug-and-gangland drama. That isn't surprising because Brady Hood, one of the two directors of *Great Expectations*, also directed *Top Boy*.

Ashley Thomas (aka the rapper Bashy), one of the stars of *Top Boy*, now plays Jaggers, the lawyer employed by Magwitch to tell Pip about his great expectations. 'I will teach you first to be a rat,' the streetwise Jaggers tells Pip, 'then a snake, then a vulture and then, with blood dripping from your beak, I will teach you how to be a gentleman.'

Knight's adaptation is as subtle as a sledgehammer. 'Look, Pip,' says Miss H, opening the door to a room in which a string quartet are happily playing a waltz, 'a beautiful society ballroom built by my father on the proceeds of opium, indigo and slaves.' She and Estella are next seen lying in an opium haze.

In his zeal to make the connections between Victorian values and 21st-century moral depravities, Knight has Pip, who refuses to sell manacles that will be used on slaves, trying to shift some opium (given to him by Miss H) down by the docks. Told by Miss Havisham to ask for £6 (the equivalent today of £100), he looks as nervous as any other novice dealer.

Given that opium, the only painkiller available, was not only legal in the 19th century but available over the counter for a penny, much as aspirin is today, the scene is embarrassing.

In other words, lower your expectations.

MUSIC

RICHARD OSBORNE

GREEK PASSION PLAY

'It is good for everyone to return to the old truths, even if they appear to be not exactly modern and topical, and even if they are not the truth, but merely a faith in something good and sound.'

So wrote the Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů. He was working on his operatic adaptation of the legendary Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis's epic novel *Christ Recrucified*, published in English in 1954.

The Greek Passion – as the opera came to be named – would be Martinů's last important work, and, some would argue, his greatest.

Musical realisations of the Passion mostly dramatise the story as the gospels tell it, not as it resonates today amid the cacophony of human affairs.

In 2007, in a bid for contemporary 'relevance', Glyndebourne raided the music of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* to create an opera-cum-oratorio in the aftermath of the 1996 Dunblane massacre. It was a bogus construct – the very opposite of Martinů's theatrically thrilling distillation of Kazantzakis's reimaging of the Passion, with its engagement of the wider themes of good and evil, selfishness and abnegation, and the ambiguities of the Christian Church's own behaviour and beliefs.

Kazantzakis's drama begins on Easter Tuesday. Greek villagers living on Turkish land celebrate the Resurrection; the priest busies himself casting the septennial Passion play.

Refugees appear: fellow Greeks, stricken survivors of the destruction of their village by the Turks. The priest and his self-protecting flock refuse them sanctuary. But two villagers – the shepherd Manolios, Jesus in the Passion play, and a café-owner who will play James – point them to a mountainside where there's abundant scrubland and a plentiful supply of 'water and partridges'.

An elderly refugee tells how he's been thrice uprooted: by plague, earthquake and the Turks. Now they will make a new home, build a church and create their community afresh. It's a brave hope – and, in the end, a vain one.

As the story unfolds, the Passion-play actors come to identify with their roles – fatally so, in the case of Manolios. His immersion in Christ's teaching, and his turning the refugees' retreat into a holy mountain, lead him to be seen as a dangerous visionary. Excommunicated by the bully-boy chief priest, he's murdered on the steps of the church.

Martinů is often thought of as a rootless cosmopolitan, a maverick talent footloose in Paris in the inter-war years. Yet he was fascinated by the idea that Christ dwells among us in those individuals who embody his ideals: 'It was a belief I took with me from my home.'

The fact that his early home was the tower of the village church where his father served as watchman may have influenced this.

But why is *The Greek Passion* less well known than operas of similar humanity and visceral power? Such as Berg's *Wozzeck* or Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*, another work that leaves those who see it stunned and silent at the final curtain.

The explanation lies partly in the

Christ recrucified: Manolios's murder in Martinů's *The Greek Passion*

work's own early exile at the hands of the board of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. It commissioned the work's English-language première, then unaccountably cancelled it.

Martinů was devasted. Herbert von Karajan, who'd long admired Kazantzakis's work, offered to produce the opera in Vienna, but there were complications over its initial length and Martinů's indecision about the ending. The première of what would eventually be a swift-moving two-hour music drama took place in Zurich in 1961, two years after Martinů's death.

The first British production, a never-to-be-forgotten staging by Welsh National Opera, golden in the heyday of its existence in 1981, was conducted by Charles Mackerras. Later that year, he and the Czech Supraphon company took the production into the recording studio.

The CDs have never been out of the catalogues. Rightly so, given their fine technical quality, the blaze of Mackerras's conducting and a cast that remains unequalled. Sung in the original English, it features John Mitchinson as Manolios; John Tomlinson as the brutal priest; and Helen Field, unforgettable in the role of Katerina, the alluring young widow who slowly discovers why she's been cast as Mary Magdalene.

In 1999, Czech television filmed the opera, using outside locations, Czech actors and the soundtrack of the Mackerras recording. Like a great radio play, the opera works well on CD.

Yet there's no doubting the extra dimension the film – now a Supraphon DVD – brings, not least in the cathartic final scene, completed shortly before Martinů's death.

This takes the form of a setting of the *Kyrie*, the Christian prayer for mercy, in which the two communities briefly join before the refugees resume their journey.

'Be of good courage!' enjoins their priest. 'Forward. The march begins again.'

ANWAR HUSSEIN / ALAMY

GOLDEN OLDIES

RACHEL JOHNSON

CORONATION CHICKEN

'Why Won't the Big Stars Perform at King Charles's Coronation?' ran the headline in *Rolling Stone*.

You can take it the venerable mag does not mean Andrew Lloyd Webber and Bryn Terfel. All the predictable and Zadok-the-Priest-style elements of this divine ceremony on 6th May are long since nailed on.

There's new stuff from a dozen diverse 'n' inclusive composers, including a new anthem and a new march. A gospel choir. The scholars of Westminster School shouting '*Vivat Rex*' three times when the crown touches Charles III's head.

What is missing are marquee names for the concert at Windsor Castle the day after Chaz has been anointed. Inexplicably, Adele and Ed Sheeran have examined their diaries and are washing their hair that night. So is Elton John. And Robbie Williams. There are even rumours that the Spice Girls – not even an actual band – have a diary clash and discovered they have what we call in our house a pressing 'subsequent engagement'.

All the classical musicians rostered have issued gushing statements to commemorate their contributions to the glorious and auspicious event, which will 'signify the promotion of peace, unity and understanding through the power of music and the arts from cultures across the globe, fully reflecting the vision of our prescient monarch'.

But there is currently no pop star listed to provide a fanfare for the common man at Windsor. In answer to *Rolling Stone*'s question, I think this is why.

Harry and Meghan have booby-trapped it.

What pop star who wants to appeal to millennials and survive on social media needs brand association with the Royals – according to the Sussexes the ground zero, the *fons et origo* of white, imperial, racist, colonial, patriarchal privilege?

Oh, and I forgot Prince Andrew. They don't want the taint of playing for an alleged sexual predator either, perhaps.

So if we get Roger Waters, Sir Rod Stewart and Lulu at the Coronation Concert, don't be cross with Harry Styles for failing to think of England and worrying about his own image instead. Blame Prince Harry, Oprah, Netflix and *Spare*.

It's wokies wot ruined Windsor. Pop stars used to queue round the block to serenade Queen Elizabeth.

U2, Noel Gallagher, the Killers etc are falling over themselves to stand up to Putin and play at Lviv Aid in June. You're pushing at an open door there, mate!

But for our new King? At Windsor Castle? 7th May? Checks diary. Tumbleweed.

There are a few weeks to go but, at this point, the King would be lucky to book the tribute band Rumours of Fleetwood Mac, who I note are playing very close by, at High Wycombe, on 7th May.

Everyone else is frit. Instead of putting in a shift, for King and Country, they're playing Coronation Chicken instead.

Very Posh Spice: Prince Charles and the Spice Girls, 1997

EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

BERTHE MORISOT: SHAPING IMPRESSIONISM

Dulwich Picture Gallery, to 10th September

Nowadays, it is scarcely acceptable to mention a pre-20th-century woman artist without describing her as disadvantaged.

Many were, of course. But from the middle of the 18th century, women had been exhibiting as professionals in both Paris and London. Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and Angelica Kauffman were far from alone in being recognised by contemporaries as pre-eminent in their fields.

Even though Berthe Morisot (1841-95) wrote in her diary in 1890, with reference to critics, 'I don't think there has ever been a man who treated a woman as an equal, and that's all I would have asked for – I know I am worth as much as they are,' it is difficult to see her as other than positively advantaged. Her mother was related to Fragonard. Her wealthy parents encouraged her to become a painter. And her husband, Edouard Manet's brother Eugène, subordinated his career to hers.

She was not just treated as an equal by her fellow Impressionists, but regarded, even by initially hostile critics, as a leader among them. As early as 1872, two years before the first Impressionist exhibition, the perceptive dealer Paul Durand-Ruel bought 22 of her works.

Her reputation, as with many other women painters, declined after her death, but that was in part because her supportive family had retained or re-acquired so much of her best work.

It has also been said that, because she lacked self-confidence, she destroyed many early efforts, but that might just as well have been because she wanted to be known only by her best works. If so, it was an example that at least Renoir among her colleagues could have followed to advantage.

Even so, a year after her death, Monet, Degas, Renoir and Mallarmé arranged a memorial show of 400 works. Because of her early training by Corot, among others, her drawing, in paint as well as pencil or ink, may well have been the best of the group, and her style continually evolved.

This show, organised by the Musée Marmottan and Dulwich, brings rarely-seen works to hang alongside some of the earlier artists who influenced her. They include not only Georges de La Tour and Fragonard, but Reynolds, Gainsborough and Romney – encountered on her English honeymoon.

Even her most Impressionist portraits convey the sitter's character: her *Julie Dreaming*, of her daughter from whom she caught the pneumonia that killed her, is the epitome of a sulky teenager.

Berthe Morisot, *anticlockwise from left*: *Eugène Manet on the Isle of Wight*, 1885; *Apollo revealing his divinity to the shepherdess Issé*, 1892; *At the Ball*, 1875

MUSÉE MARMOTTAN MONET, PARIS

Pursuits

GARDENING

DAVID WHEELER

PAEAN TO PEONIES

I'm starting again with peonies.

In our previous garden, I grew many of the herbaceous kind. They were well established, throwing more than 30 blooms per plant above elegant foliage, which in itself is highly decorative. We sold up and moved in August – an inauspicious month to attempt any kind of transplanting in the northern hemisphere. Moreover, peonies hate disturbance. They like a settled home, in exchange for which they'll pay a dividend of noble, ever-expanding floriferous clumps for decades.

The snake that supposedly lives in every Eden means my peony restart is somewhat painful. The serpent is the peony's expense. They're not cheap.

I could beg small divisions from friends' established plants, but that's an imposition I'd hesitate to impose on chums, doubtless proud of magnificent trophies that might be damaged by potentially harmful interference.

While youngsters or small transplants demand careful handling, a well-established plant is a toughie, requiring little more than a sprinkling of slow-release potash fertiliser in the autumn.

My peony bible is Alice Harding's *The Peony*. It sits on a shelf with monographs of varying value by Allan Rogers, David Michener, Josef Halda, Martin Page and Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall. Harding's, the oldest of the lot and happily still in print, was first published in 1917.

Yes, 1917. Who, during the First World War and its aftermath, was giving much thought to flower-growing? Ms Harding, an American with a garden 'of unusual size and beauty' in New Jersey, relates a touching story in her later (1923) book, *Peonies in the Little Garden*.

In March 1919, visiting the battlefronts of northern France ('A sadder, more appalling vision of destruction never was'), her party stopped for some midday sustenance in the hamlet of Vauvillers.

In the pink: *Paeonia x suffruticosa*

She chose a broken wall by a cottage some 50 feet from the road as a suitable place on which to spread their lunch. The fruit trees and shrubs had been annihilated by enemy projectiles; neat garden walls had been 'blasted into space'.

Picking her way over the mangled ground to a fragment of remaining wall, Harding came upon two peony plants pushing through the earth: 'Tears brimmed. I could not control them. Here had been a home and a cherished garden.'

Yet despite the horror of surrounding devastation, the inhabitant, 'an old peasant woman', discovering that 'Madam, too, loved *les belles pivoines*', urged her to take one of the only two roots she had left.

With no war-torn garden to plunder, here in south-west Wales it's a prising open of the moneybox, an internet trawl for mail-order suppliers or a long journey to a specialist nursery.

Supreme among such establishments is Kelways, founded in 1851 and trading still near Langport, Somerset. In long-gone days, a railway line crossed its Peony Valley, where their latest seedlings and varieties were trialled. A temporary station called Peony Valley Halt was reputedly erected every June. Trains on the London to Penzance line were said to pause there, enabling 'Ladies and Gentlemen [to] stroll through the lines of peonies, taking in the scent, maybe purchasing tins of Peony Valley Talcum Powder before continuing their journey.'

With hundreds of peonies to choose from (singles, doubles, white through to darkest red and a scattering of yellows), I need to remind myself of their individual glories. Claire Austin has a national collection at Sarn in Powys, close to the Shropshire border (open days: 8th and 9th June), and more can be seen in collections in Gloucestershire and Bedfordshire (see plantheritage.org.uk for details). Yes, let rip the piggy bank!

David's Instagram account is @hortusjournal

KITCHEN GARDEN

SIMON COURTAULD

QUINCE

Quince trees are more susceptible to spring frosts than other fruit trees, as they come into flower earlier. After a bumper quince crop last autumn, I cannot believe that we shall again have a hundred fruit from one tree this year. But we are hoping to get through April without any damaging frosts.

It is not too late to plant a quince tree in April; bare-root trees about four feet tall can be bought for less than £30.

Quinces, which are self-fertile, can also be grown in containers, and their height restricted, with pruning, to a few feet. Whether they're in open ground or in pots, a sunny, sheltered site should be chosen where possible, and the trees covered with fleece if frost threatens. Our trees have reached a height of about 12 feet after ten years.

There are pear-shaped quinces, such as Meeches Prolific, while Serbian Gold looks more like an apple. (Both are available from Pomona Fruits.) Aphrodite's golden apple may well

have been a quince, and it has been said that the forbidden fruit picked by Eve was not an apple but a quince.

When harvested in October, quinces can almost be confused with apples. Quinces should have a light fluff on the skin, and they will pass their heady scent on to apples if the fruit are put in a bowl together.

While writing my recent biography of Jane Dormer, Duchess of Feria (*Lady of Spain*), I came across her recommendations for quince jelly and quince marmalade, both popular in the 16th century.

I have the impression that quinces for the table are back in fashion this century.

Marmalade is probably better made with Seville oranges, but our quince jelly is delicious, especially with pâté. Apart from the excellent *membrillo* (quince cheese), my wife has produced pickled quinces and quince ice cream.

I have never dined on mince and slices of quince, with or without a runcible spoon. But slices of the fruit are well worth roasting round a joint of pork. And this year we shall try making quince vodka.

COOKERY

ELISABETH LUARD

SPRING ALFRESCO

Get yourself out and about this merry month of May with Gill Meller's *Outside*, a gloriously imaginative collection of recipes and stories for campfire cooks.

Atmospheric illustrations by the author's long-time collaborator, photographer Andrew Montgomery, perfectly match the romance of the text.

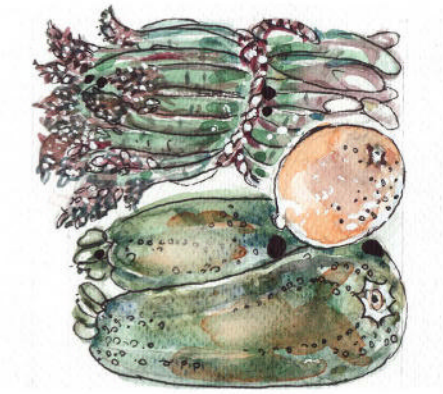
Meller learned his craft working with Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall on the River Cottage cookbooks, several of which he wrote, and it shows.

Here's a mouthful of spring.

New season asparagus with goat's cheese, mint and lemon

First of the year's young spears, slivered and dressed with fresh white cheese, are served raw as a salad with a sharp, lemony dressing. Serves 2-3 as a starter.

Large bunch of asparagus, trimmed of its woody parts
1 large lemon
4 spring onions, thinly sliced
100g soft white goat's cheese
(Optional) handful of young pea or broad-bean tops
The dressing
1 tsp caster sugar
1 tbsp sunflower oil
2 tbsps extra-virgin olive oil
4-5 chives, very finely sliced



1 tsp Dijon mustard
Sea salt and freshly-ground pepper

Place the trimmed asparagus spears one by one along the edge of a thickish chopping board. Using a vegetable peeler (or sharp knife), shave each spear into long, thin ribbons. Start just below the tip and run down to the base. Split each tip in half and place with the shavings in a roomy bowl.

Prepare the lemon dressing. Zest half the lemon, then cut the fruit in half through the equator, so the lemon will sit flat, cut side uppermost. Working carefully round each side, slice off pith and skin, separate the segments with a sharp knife and reserve. Squeeze the juice from the emptied-out shells into a jar with the zest. Add the rest of the dressing ingredients and shake well to combine.

Cut the lemon segments into 2-3 little pieces and add them to the asparagus shavings in the bowl. Toss with the chives, half the mint leaves and half the dressing. Just before serving, finish with crumbled white cheese and the remaining mint leaves and dressing. Finish with the shoots, if using.

Courgette fritters with mint, dill and chilli

Grated cheese is an inspired addition to the classic combination of courgette and mint – perfect as a vegetarian main course. Makes 6-8 small fritters or one large fritter.

2-3 courgettes (depending on size)
50g plain flour
50g grated mature Cheddar
A pinch of chilli flakes
1 small garlic clove, crushed
½ lemon: grated zest (reserve the fruit)
1 large egg
½ tsp baking power
Flaky salt and freshly-ground pepper
To finish
2 tbsps olive oil
A handful of dill, chopped
A handful of mint leaves, shredded

Lightly salt the grated courgette and leave to drain a little, then pick it up by the handful and squeeze out as much liquid as possible.

Mix all the fritter ingredients together – courgette, flour, chilli, garlic, zest, egg, baking powder – and season with salt and pepper.

Heat the griddle or heavy frying pan, add the olive oil and wait till it sizzles. Spoon in the mixture and pat it out with the back of a spoon to make one large pancake or 6-8 smaller ones.

Fry till crisp and golden, turning each fritter once, allowing 4-5 minutes on each side. Sprinkle with a little lemon juice, dill and mint. Serve immediately, hot from the pan, to eat with your fingers.

RESTAURANTS

JAMES PEMBROKE

FRENCH LESSONS

French food in London goes through phases: bistro in the seventies; Roux brothers lavish in the eighties; nouvelle cuisine in the nineties; some of the above in the noughties; nowhere in the teens – and in the twenties? It's the era of Bouchon Racine, in Farringdon: gutsy, smelly, noisy French cuisine for truckers (and publishers).

And I know why. Henry Harris, the chef/owner, is a major fan of the gutsy, smelly, noisy French cop series *Spiral*. Like the rest of us, he mispronounces it *Speeeeraaaaal*, ignoring the fact that the French title is *Engrenages*, and *Spiral* its English translation.

No matter. *Spiral* is France, as we know it to be: the men are as ugly, unshaven and as smelly as Quasimodo. They grunt and swear, and live in holes in the ground. Very *Lord of the Rings*. The women are gorgeous, sublime and oh so clever. Very *Game of Thrones*.

Fortunately for French population growth, they like nothing more than indulging in earthy, rough sex with the uglies, especially if the semi-psychotic ones are in the middle of a swear-athon, after a car chase or, worse, *dans les banlieues*. They just love ugly. No Left Bank for them.

When apart, the men eat kebabs and burgers; the women oysters and larks' tongues. If ever they meet *à table*, the men cram their 25-inch necks into 18-inch-collar shirts around which they wrap a tie, garotte-like; they wear jackets with sleeves up to their elbows, and they pour an entire bottle of Old Spice over their grimy bodies which they stuff into the tightest 24-inch-waist jeans which their 200-year-old gran boil-washed with dog bones.

ELISABETH LUARD

Meanwhile, the women purr in YSL black dresses. Both genders have tattoos.

Together they devour Bayonne ham and celeriac remoulade, *tête de veau*, snails (even though the men would far prefer worms and woodlice), rabbit with mustard, confit canard and crème caramel. It's like the dinner scene in *Tom Jones*. Only sexier.

There are no menus because the men mistook them for bavette steaks and chewed them to ribbons. Lithe, pretty waiters and waitresses hulk enormous blackboards with everything listed.

And they never, ever ask, 'Do you have any dietary requirements?', because the last waiter to do so was flambéed. There's barely a wine list because they just drink buckets of Côtes du Rhone until they remember they like Cognac. Because no one else does.

And clever Henry Harris, formerly of Racine in Knightsbridge, knew this was the magic formula we all want: a Lyonnaise bouchon with bare floorboards and white tablecloths.

And where better than above The Three Compasses, a 300-year-old pub in Farringdon, where they even serve Moretti beer on draught? Book a spring lunch well in advance.

The French are very much back in town. Sad to hear that La Ferme in Primrose Hill has closed – but its *petite soeur*, La Petite Ferme in Farringdon (see the January 2023 issue), still raises the flag over the barricades.

Margaux in South Ken has gone for the exposed-brick walls and dim-lighting look, making it a perfect seductress's web. It has a great wine list but it's too franglais for the *Spiral* crew – all Gressingham duck and corn-fed chicken.

One thing you can be sure of: you'll never find miso-glazed cauliflower on the blackboard at Bouchon Racine.

DRINK

BILL KNOTT

ULTIMATE HANGOVER CURE

The Oldie's publisher, James Pembroke, who some years ago was, after a gruelling selection procedure, also appointed its restaurant critic, is a man of almost monastic self-denial.

His métier, however, occasionally forces him to over-indulge in alcohol and to cope with its deleterious effects.

Knowing that I have the same dedication to my craft, he kindly shared his latest discovery: a Swedish-made product called Myrkl. Swallow two pills, he said, a couple of hours before going out on the lash (I paraphrase) and you'll wake next morning as fresh as a daisy.

Mankind has achieved much, but a hangover cure cannot be counted among its successes. There is Jeeves's favourite, the prairie oyster – 'It is the Worcester Sauce that gives it its colour. The raw egg makes it nutritious. The red pepper gives it its bite' – but I have never found it as efficacious as Bertie evidently did.

Pliny the Elder apparently swore by a fried canary or two, while less esoteric options include the full English breakfast and various 'hairs of the dog', including Fernet-Branca, the Bloody Mary or a Black Velvet, which merely delay the inevitable. The only hangover remedy I suspect might work was practised by a medical student I knew at university: he would cannulate himself before going on a bender, then attach himself to a saline drip overnight.

So was this the over-imbiber's Holy Grail? Two days and £24 later, my smart, midnight-blue packet of 30 miracle Myrkl capsules arrived. I swallowed two and gave them the sternest test I could devise: trial by baijiu.

The distiller at Léopold Gourmel, who make excellent cognac, once told me that there are two kinds of distillation: 'thin', meaning that only the ethanol-heavy heart of the distillate is preserved, most suited to white spirits like vodka or gin; and 'fat', where more of the congeners – substances that add flavour and aroma, but can also provoke pernicious hangovers – are retained. Whisky and brandy are cases in point.

If cognac is a fat distillation, then baijiu is morbidly obese. A Chinese spirit usually made from sorghum, it smells as though someone has spilt a few gallons of nail-polish-remover in an especially malodorous farmyard. And, it might surprise you to learn, it is the world's most popular spirit, outselling brandy, whisky, gin and vodka combined.

A bottle of the stuff had been glowering at me for months. So – having limbered up with a *sol y sombra*, a dangerous Spanish blend of brandy and anisette – I dived in, pairing it with the spiciest, most mouth-numbing Sichuanese food I could have delivered. I reeled towards bed fearing the worst.

Next morning, I certainly felt a twinge or two, but the sandblasted mouth and the sledgehammer to the brain were notably absent. A brace of ibuprofen and a pint or two of Earl Grey, and I was back on form. Further research is required ... but perhaps without the baijiu.

SPORT

ROY HODGSON, 75 NOT OUT

Did Jeremy Hunt have a word with Crystal Palace Football Club's owner?

There was the Chancellor, presenting a budget in which he urgently tried to fill the gaps in the labour market by encouraging oldies back into the workforce. And then it was announced that Roy Hodgson was to end his retirement and return as the Palace manager at the fine old age of 75.

What an ad he is for the working oldie. Here is an astonishing statistic about the veteran coach: he was born closer to the first-ever football-league fixture in September 1888 than he was to today. And yet here he is, fighting the imposed boredom of retirement, not by stacking shelves at Tesco or by volunteering at his local food bank, but by engaging in one of the most stress-inducing employment positions in modern Britain.

I have attended two valedictory Hodgson press conferences. But it would be unfair to cast him as the Frank Sinatra of football.

In his tone at both, there was a sense of unfinished business. The first was when he left Palace in 2021 after four years in charge. Yes, he said, he was in his seventies. Yes, he acknowledged, he had enough in the bank to spend his days reading novels on a Caribbean beach. But he still felt he had something to offer.

And, sure enough, he was back a year later, put in charge of Watford in the attempt to keep them from being relegated from the Premier League. When that didn't work out, he had another apparent farewell. It was put to him that surely this time it really was all over. His smile suggested otherwise. If the phone rang, his rueful grin implied, he would answer.

And he did. Because here he is, back in charge of a Premier League club, his thirst unquenchable. In an unusual inversion of the norm in football, he has replaced the manager who replaced him. Patrick Vieira, sacked by Palace for flirting all too closely with relegation, can now boast the unique distinction of being both Hodgson's successor and his predecessor.

Mind you, as tasks go, Hodgson has been presented with a tough one. At the time of his reappointment, Palace were sliding inexorably down the league table. His job is to prevent a club that has grown used to the financial insulation of Premier League existence from falling into the abyss.

However it pans out, what a joy it is that, in a game in which modernity is deemed paramount, a man whose first job as a professional coach was 46 years ago is still reckoned to have the wherewithal.

He might be pitting his wits against rival managers three decades his junior, but here's the thing about Hodgson: he is old but not remotely old-fashioned. Hugely well read (he numbers among his favourite authors John Updike, J P Donleavy and Mario Vargas Llosa), he's fluent in five languages (there is nothing he enjoys more than answering a Finnish television reporter's question in their own tongue) and perfectly tailored (he has his suits made by Apsley and buys his ties from Drake's on Clifford Street).

He also knows precisely how to motivate modern footballers. He might not be able to identify their favourite hip-hop artists (he prefers the opera), but he is smart enough to understand what makes them tick.

And he has a brilliant understanding, forged through decades of experience, of how to get the best out of others, even if they are younger than his grandchildren.

But what makes Hodgson all the more admirable is this. Unlike those medical consultants Hunt was so anxious to lure back into the workplace, he is not returning simply to top up his pension.

He is doing it because he knows he still can.

MOTORING

ALAN JUDD

MY FAT CAR'S CRASH DIET

A winding country road, two lanes, narrowing in places, and stepping on it a bit in the old Volvo because road diversions had made me late – about 50mph where I'd normally have done 40mph – and a smallish oncoming SUV doing the same.

Clunk.

Wing mirrors. The interior mirror showed he didn't stop – not even any brake lights as he disappeared round the bend. Neither did I. It's happened before, about seven years ago, and the mirror surround has been taped ever since.

Whose fault – mine, his or both? Or can we find something else to blame?

Cars, like us, have got fatter. The younger they are, the fatter they're getting (that's happening to us too, though some don't like it said). Since the 1990s, safety legislation has demanded side-impact protection in doors, while handling demands have encouraged wider axles and tyres.

They're also getting taller, as a result of regulations specifying minimum clearance between engine and bonnet, which means raising window and roof levels.

Another factor is global markets' catering for countries where distances are greater and roads wider than in this realm, characterised by G K Chesterton as the country where the rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road. Finally, EVs (electric vehicles) often have big, heavy batteries built into the floor, which necessitates raising and widening the rest.

The Mark One VW Golf of the 1970s measured 12 feet 6 long by 5 feet 4 wide. Its contemporary, eighth-generation descendant is just over 14 feet long by 5 feet 10 wide. Its Polo sibling, aged 47, not only has outgrown earlier Golfs but is wider than the original Passat.

Get in almost any car of the 1960s or earlier and you'll find it surprisingly intimate. Even those big old P4 Rovers (the upright ones, known as Aunties – I've had four and would like another) were narrower than a modern Golf.

Or we could blame the roads. National Highways recommend that each lane on a road should be 11 feet 7 wide, which is not much when you take into account drains, hedges and branches (not to mention pot-holes).

The British Parking Association – yes, there really is one – recommends that parking spaces be 7 feet 10 wide, but in 2016 relaxed restrictions to permit a minimum of 5 feet 10.

This means that most SUVs and the latest Porsche 911 wouldn't fit at all, while to get out of a humble Polo you'd have to squeeze through a two-inch door gap. The garages of many modern houses are no better – you can drive in, but you have to stay in the car. No wonder most of them are used to store anything other than cars – unless you have a four-foot-six-wide Citroën Ami quadricycle.

But, to be honest, these excuses won't do. I can't say who was more at fault for the clash of mirrors – and I certainly can't say I wasn't. If I hadn't been hurrying, I'd probably have braked and pulled over.

It's an electrically retractable mirror with indicator repeaters, for which Volvo would charge just under £500 – about a quarter of the value of the car. There's more tape on it now, the glass though cracked is usable and it would still pass the MOT. Thanks to eBay, I can get replacement glass for £7.50. Otherwise, complete used mirrors can be had for around £150-£300.

The exorbitant cost of such bits and pieces is partly how manufacturers make their money, of course – along with sales of such superfluous extras as electric seats and windows. But I'd better not start on that.

Matthew Webster: Digital Life

Come fly with me – more cheaply

I have just done my first proper travelling since before the pandemic, visiting Singapore and Vietnam.

It was a great trip, and I was especially struck by how easy it was to make all the arrangements by mercilessly using apps on my smartphone.

To start with, I booked our long-haul flights on my phone, as the airline offered a small discount for using their app, which also checked us in at Heathrow (no queuing at the counter) and sent our boarding passes to our phones.

In Singapore, our COVID vaccinations were checked using the NHS app. We'd booked our hotel using the Hotels.com app and our taxi came from the Grab.com app, the local Uber equivalent.

In the hotel, and many restaurants, the menu was visible only by our scanning a barcode app, which made it appear on our phones.

Next stop Vietnam. Sitting in our hotel room in Singapore, we used the Trip.com app to book flights, hotel and a car, to collect us from the airport. Trip.com sent confirmations and boarding passes to our phones.

The owner of our Vietnamese hotel organised all our trips on his phone. I hope he got commission; he was very helpful, as was everyone there. To someone of my generation, with memories of the 1960s, it's extraordinary that Vietnam is now a holiday destination. I shouldn't be surprised – it is a very beautiful country. It's also developing fast; my advice would be to see it sooner rather than later.

Back in Singapore, we had to change hotels mid-stay, which was again all arranged through the Hotels.com app.

Throughout our trip, all messaging and phone calls (worldwide) were done using WhatsApp (free, but smartphone required) and we read British newspapers every day, just as at home, on our phones. I also downloaded a book to read. The photos we took with our phones were all stored online for later.

On the plane home (check-in and boarding passes all by phone, again), we could have used the onboard Wi-fi to check our emails, but that seemed a step too far. We were on holiday, after all.

In short, apps ruled the roost. No paper was involved, no clipping tickets, no thick wadge of documents filling our wallets and no infuriating conversations with faraway call centres. It was all on the phone.

These clever digital developments come at a price. Smartphones are not cheap to own or run and if the battery goes flat, you are snookered. A portable power bank (a spare battery), with an appropriate lead, is important. I'd take two leads, as at least one will die or get left on a plane (both happened to me).

Please don't make my other stupid mistake. I ran up a £75 bill on my phone in the first 12 hours before I discovered, buried deep in my provider's website, that their charges in Singapore were ruinous. The answer is to buy a local SIM card for a few pounds and remove your British card.

That aside, it all went very smoothly – but then I am fairly adept at this sort of digital interaction. I worry that my experience may be a little disheartening for some *Oldie*-readers who have yet to get to grips with a smartphone in any depth, if at all, and may have no desire to.

I fear they will soon find themselves excluded from many opportunities, as the digital grip of modern life tightens around us.

Travel is already both more difficult and more costly for those without a smartphone and I'm afraid the situation will only get worse. Intrepid oldie travellers should master a smartphone.

Webwatch

For my latest tips and free newsletter, go to www.askwebster.co.uk

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Shows you how to get anywhere from anywhere, by air, train, bus, ferry and more.

The Man in Seat Sixty-one
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Started as a hobby by a train enthusiast – now his job. It helps you to take a train or ferry rather than flying.

I will happily try to solve your basic computer and internet problems. Go to www.askwebster.co.uk or email me at webster@theoldie.co.uk

Margaret Dibben: Money Matters

Accelerate your money supply

It seems everything in life is moving fast.

We expect to transfer money from one bank account to another in a blink, contact friends electronically within seconds, and spend money with the flick of a card.

But there are still transactions that take vastly longer than they should or need to – and it's not just waiting for customer-service departments to answer the phone. It is indefensible to have to wait months to register powers of attorney, activate pensions or switch investments to different providers.

Companies can speed up their systems when they put their minds to it. Last year, driving licences and passports were taking ages simply to be renewed, but both have shown a dramatic improvement in turnaround time and replacements now arrive within days.

Switching bank accounts became faster a few years ago. The improved service has helped thousands of customers in these constrained times to chase better-paying savings accounts and snatch cash incentives for opening new current accounts.

Admittedly, moving investments is far more complicated than changing simple bank accounts. Transferring investments from one place to another, activating a pension and receiving an inheritance all involve a number of different organisations. But there are still no excuses for long delays caused by using

outdated systems, sending letters second-class and just waiting weeks to finalise the transaction.

Once you have put in the effort and made the decision to switch your investments or transfer your pension, you just want the company currently holding your money to get on with it.

Your money is at risk while you are waiting for your funds to arrive with the new provider, because they are not invested during that time and you will lose out if prices go up. Conversely, you can benefit if they fall.

Complaints about companies taking so long to complete clients' transactions have prompted an industry initiative to speed up the process of moving money around. It's called Star, an accreditation scheme for financial institutions that handle savings, investments and pensions. Signing up is voluntary.

Firms that join will be assessed on how quickly they complete your request and how well they communicate. Those deemed good enough are awarded bronze, silver or gold accreditation – but, so far, only a minority of companies have earned these certificates. Those that don't will at least have demonstrated an intention to try to improve.

The aim is that companies with Star accreditation will be more competitive than those without it and so will win more customers. That is going to take some time. Right now, clients are stuck with the company they signed up to, which might be one that failed the test or chose not even to be judged.

There is nothing you can do about that, and it will probably not even be your main criterion next time you buy a pension or investment.

However, if right now you are suffering because a company is taking a long time to transfer your invested money, check on Star's website to see whether it's a member of the scheme. If it is, you will have grounds to complain.

'So let me get this straight ... income of golden eggs and magic beans, expenses of one cow, deduction of one giant beanstalk, and ***no*** *receipts?'*

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The Sand Martin

BY JOHN McEWEN * ILLUSTRATED BY CARRY AKROYD

The sand martin (*Riparia riparia*) is the smallest and least numerous of British *Hirundinidae* (swallows).

Up to 225,000 pairs arrive in the UK to breed in the summer, mostly from tropical West Africa, which compares with 620,000 house-martin pairs and 700,000 barn swallows.

It is one of the earliest summer migrants and also the most water-loving. As its name suggests, its natural habitat is sandy; it nests in tunnels dug to a depth of three feet. It is the most gregarious of the species: its favoured sites are honeycombed with the holes of hundreds of pairs.

The tunnelling requirement makes the sand martin less familiar to us than either its *Hirundinidae* cousins or the swift (not classified as a swallow), all of which frequent buildings.

John Clare (1793-1864) celebrated the difference in his poem *The Sand Martin*, written in his turbulent thirties.

Thou hermit haunter of the lonely glen
And common wild and heath – the desolate face
Of rude waste landscapes far away from men
Where frequent quarries give thee dwelling place
With strangest taste and labour undeterred
Drilling small holes along the quarry's side
More like the haunts of vermin than a bird
And seldom by the nesting boy descried
I've seen thee far away from all thy tribe
Flirting about the unfrequented sky
And felt a feeling that I can't describe
Of lone seclusion and a hermit joy
To see thee circle round nor go beyond
That lone heath and its melancholy pond.

CARRY AKROYD

In postwar Britain, the sand martin has benefited from the motorway and house-building boom. This continues the increase of gravel pits – its primary nesting site even when the pits are operational and not beneficially flooded.

Designed sites have also been provided, such as the sand cliff at Suffolk's RSPB Minsmere nature reserve. This soon-thriving colony was wiped out by a single stoat in 1989 and, despite protective fencing, it took till 1994 for colonisation to be resumed.

Gatherings of swifts, swallows and house martins hawking over water, not least city lakes, are always worth checking for less eyecatching sand martins, especially at migrating time.

It was an unexpected joy in May 2021 on a Scottish visit to see nothing but sand martins from a bridge over the Kelvin in the heart of Glasgow.

I later found a thriving colony the length of a sand dune overlooking the Atlantic, near the promontory of Rubha Ardvule, on South Uist in the Outer Hebrides.

Assisi, just like Giotto pictured it

St Francis's home town still looks much as it does in the Old Master paintings in a new National Gallery show. By *Harry Mount*

You don't have to use your imagination to see what St Francis of Assisi's home town looked like during his lifetime.

Giotto has done it for you already – in the 13th century. In a fresco (*pictured, right*) in the sprawling Basilica of St Francis in Assisi, he showed the saint outside Santa Maria sopra Minerva church – which hasn't changed a bit since Giotto painted it 700 years ago (even if he did make the temple's Corinthian columns a bit too stringy).

In fact, the view hasn't changed much for 2,000 years, since the Roman Temple of Minerva was built under the Emperor Augustus. It was turned into the current baroque church in the 16th century.

Everywhere you go in Assisi and the surrounding hills of Umbria, you see the city as St Francis (1181-1226) saw it – and as it's captured in the new Francis of Assisi exhibition at the National Gallery.

One of the many remarkable things about Francis is quite how quickly – and for how long – his story captivated painters and architects.

The fund for the mighty Basilica of St Francis was set up in 1228, only two years after the saint died. His tomb was transferred to the Basilica in Assisi in 1230, and the earliest surviving frescoes date from 1253. Those Basilica frescoes by Giotto and Cimabue were done between 1277 and 1300.

Then, for the next 400 years, St Francis remained a favourite of the great artists who star in the National Gallery exhibition – Zurbarán, Botticelli, Caravaggio, Murillo and El Greco among them. The saint was celebrated so extensively that you can now walk round Assisi and Umbria with the Old Masters as your handy guide to his life.

Francis was born in Assisi, the spoilt son of a rich silk merchant. That's how he's pictured in Giotto's fresco, *Homage of a Simple Man* (below), in a sumptuous

Francis, with halo, in Giotto's *Homage of a Simple Man*, Assisi; the scene today

ESTATE OF STANLEY SPENCER / TATE / NATIONAL GALLERY / HARRY MOUNT

Zurbarán's *St Francis*; Stanley Spencer's *St Francis and the Birds*; Eremo delle Carceri, where he preached to the birds

green cloak, receiving the homage of a prostrate figure, laying out his cloak.

To begin with, Francis followed the life expected of him, selling fine velvet in his father's business, going off to fight against neighbouring Perugia in 1202.

Incidentally, there's now a terrific exhibition on, dedicated to Perugino (c 1450-1523), Perugia's most famous painter, to commemorate the 500th anniversary of his death.

Back in Assisi, you can see the remnants of Francis's childhood home, wrapped inside the charming Renaissance church of Chiesa Nuova. You'll find an iron portcullis imprisoning a waxwork of young St Francis – at the spot his father locked him up after Francis had his epiphany.

One day, while praying in the nearby chapel of San Damiano, Francis was gazing at a painted crucifix (which survives today in Assisi's Santa Chiara Basilica). Suddenly, a voice proclaimed, 'Francis, go, repair my house, which, as you see, is falling completely into ruin.'

Francis sold some of his father's cloth and gave the proceeds to San Damiano's priest to repair the church – causing his incensed father to jail him at home.

So Francis renounced his father and his inheritance, as shown in a picture by Sassetta (1392-1450) in the National Gallery exhibition.

He began his peripatetic life of self-sacrifice, sheltering in caves and humble chapels across rural Umbria. He hid in a cave near San Damiano, begged in the hills around Assisi, tended to lepers and gravitated to his favourite, tiny chapel, the Porziuncola – an easy two-mile walk downhill from Assisi.

Today, the little, battered, frescoed chapel of Porziuncola makes for a surreal sight, marooned in the middle of the vast, classical 16th-century basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli – the seventh-biggest church in Christendom, rebuilt after an earthquake in 1832.

Another pair of earthquakes did terrible damage to the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi in 1997 – now sensitively restored.

It's at the Porziuncola that Francis founded the Franciscans. Here he also received Clare of Assisi, founder of the Order of Poor Ladies, aka the Poor Clares. St Clare is now buried in Assisi's Santa Chiara Basilica.

And it's here that he died. Despite being a place of mass pilgrimage, the Porziuncola retains a reverence-inducing air to it – while I was there, a boy of about eight flung himself onto his knees by the altar and mumbled prayers to himself for ten minutes.

You don't have to be a believer to be gripped by Francis's story – and to see how enchanting it was in his lifetime and afterwards.

It was simple to follow him – all you had to do was, like Francis, take a vow of poverty and give up everything. Thus the rapid growth of the Franciscan Order, approved of by Pope Innocent III in Francis's lifetime. Francis travelled to Egypt during the Fifth Crusade to spread the word and met the Sultan of Egypt – again recorded by Sassetta in the show.

Francis had an accidental gift for attracting ideal stories. He set up the first Nativity scene at Greccio, near Assisi, in 1220. Most famously, he had a rapport with animals – from the wolf at Gubbio, which he persuaded to stop attacking villagers, to the birds he preached to. The scene was painted by Stanley Spencer (*above, middle*), also in the show.

You can sympathise with Francis's urge to escape town life, even if the town is as pretty as Assisi, with its higgledy-piggledy houses hewn out of big, asymmetrical chunks of stone – straight out of the Asterix and Obelix School of Architecture.

The cypress-studded hills of Umbria begin the moment you walk out of Assisi's medieval gates. I climbed – vertically, lung-bustingly, straight to heaven, it seemed – three miles along the slopes of Mount Subasio, to Francis's forest hermitage, Eremo delle Carceri.

In summer, the place is packed. But this spring I had it to myself – and, particularly when alone, I could see how close Francis felt to God here. The only sound I heard was the birds he liked to preach to – an old ilex tree, propped up by iron crutches, is said to be the spot where the sweet birds sang to him.

You can see the stone bed, carved out of the rock, where Francis slept and the chapel where he prayed. His followers prayed alongside him – several friars are still here. But the enduring image of St Francis is as the lone voice in the wilderness – as in Bellini's 1478 *St Francis in the Desert*, in the Frick.

There are some terrific pictures of a lone St Francis at the National Gallery – including his most famous depiction (*above, left*), shrouded and on his knees, by Zurbarán, and El Greco's *St Francis Receiving the Stigmata*.

If Francis is accompanied, it is by angels (in Caravaggio's *St Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy* and Botticelli's *St Francis of Assisi with Angels*) or by Jesus (in Murillo's *St Francis Embracing the Crucified Christ*).

That lone, comforting presence is everywhere in Assisi, not just in images of the saint but also in the Franciscan blessing and greeting, written all over the place: *Pax et bonum* in Latin, or *Pace et bene* in Italian. Peace and good.

You'll find plenty of both in Assisi.

Saint Francis of Assisi *is at the National Gallery (6th May to 30th July)*

Italy's Best Maestro: Perugino and his day *is at the National Gallery of Umbria, Perugia, until 11th June*

The smallest palace in the kingdom

LUCINDA LAMBTON

Queen Mary's Doll's House was meticulously designed by Lutyens, with a miniature Sherlock Holmes book – and a mini loo

Between 1921 and 1924, the great Sir Edwin Lutyens built a doll's house for Queen Mary, George V's wife.

How could this little house ensnare the devotion of over a thousand craftsmen, as well as three years' passionate attention by the country's best architect?

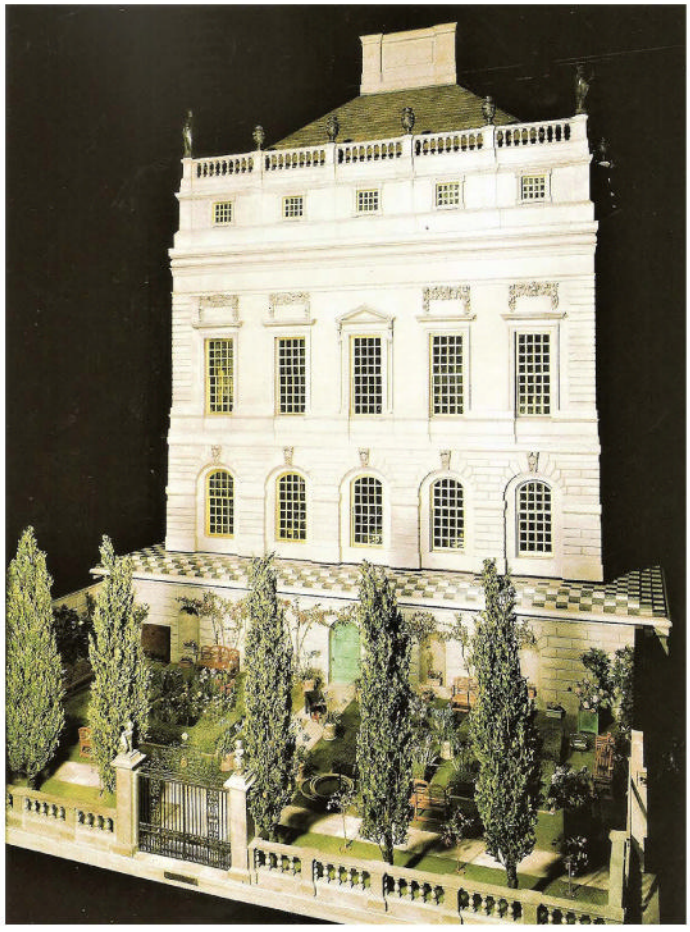
It was Princess Marie Louise, Queen Victoria's granddaughter, who on the 'impulse of the moment' first thought of asking her friend the renowned architect Edwin Lutyens to design such a rarity for the Queen. He triumphed with glittering golden knobs on.

Queen Mary had been an obsessive collector of *objets d'art*, most particularly of 'tiny craft' with a family connection which she amassed with a manically knowledgeable eye. So it came to be that perfection was to reign in miniature, to be cheered at, loved and lauded to this day.

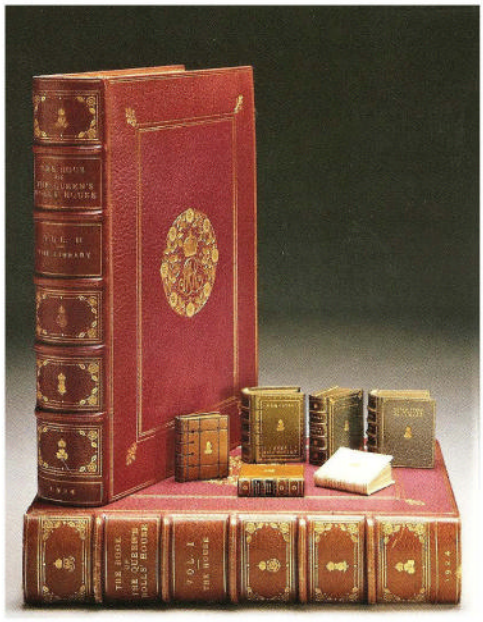
Great and glorious were the participants. The sculptor Sir George Frampton was responsible for its exterior ornamentation and, my goodness me, he most mightily triumphed – he also made Peter Pan's charming statue in London's Hyde Park.

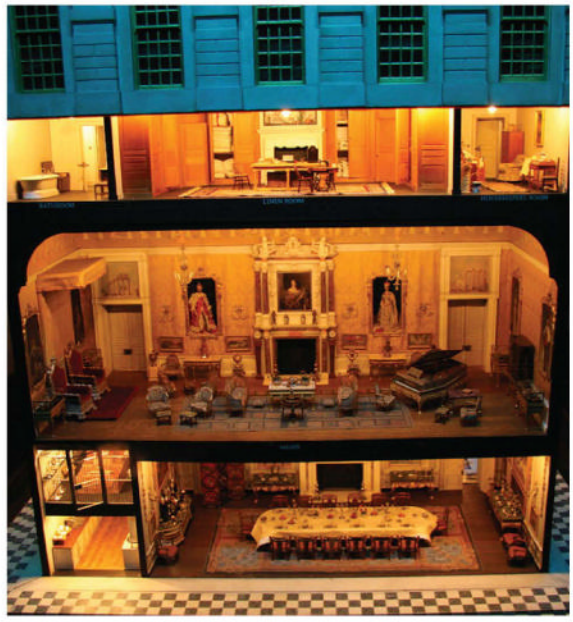
Frampton was to treat the design of the doll's house as an ingenious architectural exercise. There can be few more splendid last salvoes of Edwardian England than the decoration applied to this little building.

There is a wealth of rich-hued marble, too, much of it most marvellously presented by the Indian Government. The painted ceilings are the oddest and rarest of all the decorative elements in the house. The King's bedroom has the notes of the national anthem painted to entwine through canes of a garden gazebo. The vaults in the King's



Left: **Queen Mary's Doll's House, Windsor Castle, 1924**





Below left: **Arthur Conan Doyle wrote a Sherlock Holmes story for the doll's house.** ***Below right:*** **the grand piano in the saloon**

LUCINDA LAMBTON /PA IMAGES / ALAMY

The library had new books by Thomas Hardy, Kipling, Belloc and Sassoon. George Bernard Shaw refused to take part

bathroom were painted by Captain Lawrence Irving, grandson of actor Henry Irving.

In the saloon ceiling, there are naked figures, unmistakably of the 1920s, prancing around the cove of the ceiling, inch by inch. What a triumph and a half it is to be sure; what a perfectly glorious golden triumph.

All the diverse elements of 20th-century England are woven into the very fibre of the little building, with the culture of the country embodied within its walls.

William Nicholson, Lutyens's closest friend, painted the coved ceiling in the entrance hall. Then there's a marvellous work by the painter Glyn Philpot – here he paints his early shrieks of the artist in torment, torn between devout Catholicism and establishment art. It is quite dashing and quite tremendous.

Alongside a most graceful work depicting Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden by a winged thunderbolt, there are as many creatures as appear on God's Earth.

Tiny guns can be fired to kill a fly. They were made by Queen Victoria's gunmaker

Above: **a royal throne**

Left: **batting collapse**

Lutyens gave no less thought to the design of the nursery, adorned with Edmund Dulac's Chinese wall paintings of European fairy tales, than he did to the state dining room. He took much trouble with the Queen's boudoir and its jade- and amber-filled glass cabinets – exact copies of those in which Queen Mary displayed her *objets d'art*.

All of life is relished; sport is cheered to the skies. Tiny guns can be fired to kill a fly. They were made by James Purdey, gunmakers to the queen since Queen Victoria. A cricket bat is but a tiny sliver. Music can be played with minuscule records on a little wooden cabinet of a wind-up gramophone.

Enchanting books, bound in finest leather, fill the shelves, with a Sherlock Holmes story commissioned from Arthur Conan Doyle.

Lutyens himself was responsible for roping in many of the artists and authors, writing long and detailed requests to such luminaries as Robert Bridges, A E Housman and Rose Macaulay.

There are 750 works of art, watercolours and drawings, in pencil, pen, ink and chalk. There are etchings, mezzotints, aquatints and engravings as well as lithographs, a few photographic reproductions, one oil painting – and a lone linocut.

What a treasure it is. Never has a generation been so meticulously memorialised: from miniature rolls of Bromo lavatory paper to pneumonia vests.

The spirit of the age has been for ever captured within these little walls. As one of its creators, A C Benson, wrote, 'It has been built to outlast us all, to carry on into the future and different world this pattern of our own. It is a serious attempt to express our age and show forth in dwarf proportions the limbs of our present world.'

Let us dwell for a moment on the painted grand piano with wildly elaborate decoration by Matthew Rooke. Designed by Lutyens, the piano stands in the saloon.

All I can say is that, like every other inch of the place, it is nothing short of magical.

The rainy Roman road across Wales

PATRICK BARKHAM

Seek quotes about rain and you'll be drenched in platitudes: don't wait for the storm to pass but learn to dance in the rain; there is no life without rain; sunshine after the rain is really quite pretty.

The architects of such philosophy of precipitation have never braved the Brecon Beacons on a filthy wet day. Here, spitty, spiteful rain insinuated cold wetness through every seam of 'waterproof'. Icy water trickled down my neck, soaked my feet and fogged my glasses. It offered no refreshment or revelation; it was cold, chilling and obscuring.

The rain began gently enough, at the bottom of the hill, as I clicked through the gate with my walking companion, Tom Bullough. He has written an illuminating book about walking along Sarn Helen, an ancient track which – unusually for a Roman road – winds from south to north Wales.

We first enjoyed a gentle ascent beside the craggy edge of Craig Cerrig-gleisiad, which as Tom explained means 'the rock of blue or bruised [or salmon-coloured] stones'. Its steep edge was wooded with gnarled hawthorns and glowed copper with last year's bracken.

I hadn't realised that the Brecon Beacons possessed such grandeur and scale; I was gasping for breath as we climbed Fan Frynych. Tom, who was brought up in rural Wales in a (first-generation) sheep-farming family, glided up the slope unpuffed, telling fascinating stories of Welsh past and future, the likely loss of sheep farming and how the Celtic Christian saints might help shape the country's future.

We could have been passing through this landscape at any moment in the past 2,000 years. There was no human noise, no sign of houses or vehicles, and no other person was tackling this torrent. Even the sheep had vanished.

We squelched across peaty tops and then down again, relieved to meet the softer rain on the lower slopes of lush green pasture. Here we picked up Sarn Helen, a broad, well-paved stony track, which followed the contours of this quiet valley with great grace.

Time adds a pleasing patina to every human construction. As we stepped along stones where centurions had trod, Tom pointed out that the road had been extractive, like most infrastructure Wales has known. Its purpose was to discover wealth and carry it elsewhere, as have roads and railways since; arguably unifying a nation but also, as Tom writes, forming 'a collection of drainage basins, flowing away to the borders and the ports'.

These days, in good weather at least, the green lane of Sarn Helen carries nothing but Gore-Tex-clad armies of walkers and cyclists. On this day, the only living being we encountered was a red kite, prospecting the sodden fields for dead things. Half a mile on, we found what it was looking for: a sodden sheep's carcass, its lurid red ribs already exposed by scavengers.

Beside the pretty bog of Traeth Mawr, where young silver birches sprang up, we cut across to the site of Llanilltyd Church, a now church-less oval space with banked edges fringed by conifers and fine views of the surrounding hills. This was almost certainly a pre-Christian religious site and it sang with a sense of presence and peace.

Tom found solace during lockdown at this sacred site, which is dedicated to St Illtyd, the founder abbot of Llantwit Major monastery on the Bristol Channel coast; perhaps the first seat of learning in Britain. When Tom explained his belief that the Celtic Christian saints might show us how to live more gently with nature, it felt, genuinely, like a kind of sunshine after the rain.

To that spiritual sustenance we added hot soup at the Brecon Beacons mountain centre down the lane, and a damp chill was replaced by a warm glow – the reward at the end of every challenging walk.

Sarn Helen *by Tom Bullough is out now*

Park in the layby on the A470 (Grid ref SN972222), take the footpath west over Fan Frynych and down to reach Sarn Helen. Follow the track to Traeth Mawr. Turn left onto a footpath via Llanilltyd before turning east to reach the Brecon Beacons mountain centre (seven miles)

GARY WING

Thank 'eaven for Leslie Caron

The *Gigi* star tells *Louise Flind* about dancing with Gene Kelly, acting with Maurice Chevalier and staying in shape at 91

What started your interest in ballet?
My mother was American and danced on Broadway and talked about ballet endlessly which encouraged my desire to learn ballet.

When did you start ballet?
About age ten.

Would you have preferred to become a ballerina instead of an actress?
My first intention was to become a famous ballerina and call myself Caronova.

How come you went to Hollywood?
Gene Kelly saw me dance and decided he would like me as his partner for An American in Paris *(1951). That's how it all started, but I had no intention of being in the movies.*

What was Hollywood like in the '50s?
At first, I thought it was extremely excessive. The steaks were enough to feed a family for a week.

What was Gene Kelly like?
Gene was very friendly, and his wife Betsy Blair welcomed me.

And Maurice Chevalier?
There was a difference of about 50 years between us. Maurice kept himself to himself very much. He was a wonderful partner, always ready to do one more rehearsal.

What was Louis Jourdan like in *Gigi*?
Jourdan was really a boy from the south of France. I did a play with him in Australia and his great fun was to cook a big meal for the cast.

How did you meet director Peter Hall?
A British producer asked me to do Gigi *on stage in London, and I was asked whom I would like as a director. I had the same agent as Tennessee Williams, and she said Tennessee swore by a new young man called Peter Hall.*

What was your favourite film?
Gigi. *In fact, it was my suggestion that prompted MGM to do it as a film. I loved Colette's writing – I had her complete collection and thought she was remarkable, and I loved the story of* Gigi.

NEIL SPENCE

What's the most exotic location you've filmed in?
I filmed in Czechoslovakia, I danced all over the place with the ballet company in Egypt, Lebanon…

And the least?
I made a film called The L-Shaped Room *(1962) in what was totally slums in those days – and that was Notting Hill. Can you believe it?*

Do you think working in America had a detrimental effect when you returned to France?
It stopped the French from ever using me in French films. I was branded an American/Hollywood actress.

How do you stay so trim and lovely?
I still do exercise to keep relatively agile. I never believed in excess food, dessert, cake. I think my health and slimness are far more important.

How did you beat your drink problem?
I went to AA.

How crucial are manners?
Absolutely essential.

Do you still have a cat?
For many years I had cats, until I became about 70 and decided it was about time I tried a dog.

Where did you go on your honeymoon?
Which honeymoon? [She giggles.] I've been married three times. One of them I loathed, in Las Vegas. I actually cried when I got there. I was just 20, 21 – the first husband [Michael Laughlin, an American director]. Peter Hall was my second husband – where did we go? [She laughs.] I went on the stage that night. I was playing Gigi, and after the play was over we went to Italy. With the third husband [musician Geordie Hormel], it was something organised by the studio and not worth discussing.

Are you brave with different food abroad?
My stomach doesn't like butter any more, or cream. Oil is fine.

Anything you can't leave home without?
The key to return.

Earliest childhood-holiday memories?
My grandparents built a sort of little village in des Basques, about 15 miles from Saint-Jean-de-Luz in the mountains, and it was a magic place and the whole family congregated there. I remember going to the beach with a pony and cart.

Where is home?
I live in Kensington in a basement flat with a rather unusual garden. This was very thrilling when I had a dog.

What's your favourite food?
The French eat just about everything. I love most parts of animals, so I do eat innards and the sort of thing the English find a little repulsive.

What's your biggest headache?
At my age, it's finding bathrooms, I hate to admit.

What is the strangest place you've ever slept in while being away?
I've slept in a lot of dressing rooms.

What are your top travelling tips?
It's absolutely essential to have good shoes that fit you and you can keep on all day.

How was it to be Oldie of the Year in 2021?
Absolutely wonderful, considering the Queen had turned down the offer for herself.

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Genius crossword 425

EL SERENO

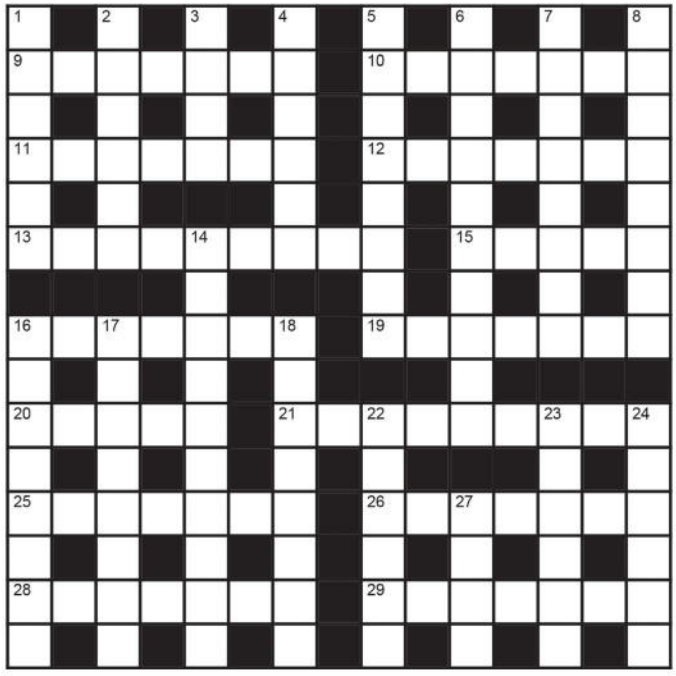
7 clues have no definition, but this may be deduced if you manage to fill in the gaps at 26

Across

9 Worry volunteers trapped in a French cottage (7)
10 Get rid of nasty boils in a hospital (7)
11 A French dwarf must be none too pleased (7)
12 One may discuss trade and be excited (7)
13 Cause further damage in front of unprotected wall of marble (9)
15 Brings in student kicked out of studies (5)
16 Bright worker on set finishing early (7)
19 Profit's back abroad, oddly and falls in North America (7)
20 Oxygen chamber taking precedence (5)
21 I'm so sober about such particles of protein manufacture (9)
25 Tears back with Italian son's shorts (7)
26 See preamble (7)
28 Make a fuss about start of meal and burn to a frazzle (7)
29 British university the Spanish repeatedly rejected (7)

Down

1 Short holiday with you. I hear - I'm not sure there's space (6)
2 Spot the girl's after (6)
3 Marx brother's lost love (4)
4 Write again, being terribly pernickety, having lost Nick (6)
5 Nothing raised after crew party (8)
6 Graduates absorbed by form of tennis (6-4)
7 Winner with one answer falls, perhaps (8)
8 Cleaner aims to develop personal appeal (8)
14 Independent state supporting speaker being bombastic (10)
16 Hiker may carry this indistinguishable heap of things on fire (8)
17 Badly clued? I'm right (8)
18 Mockingbird requiring caution in the river (8)
22 Soup that's twice what for Manuel? (6)
23 Crib supplied by heartless person in charge (6)
24 A measure of distress is terribly relative (6)
27 Disreputable type finding love in Parisian thoroughfare (4)



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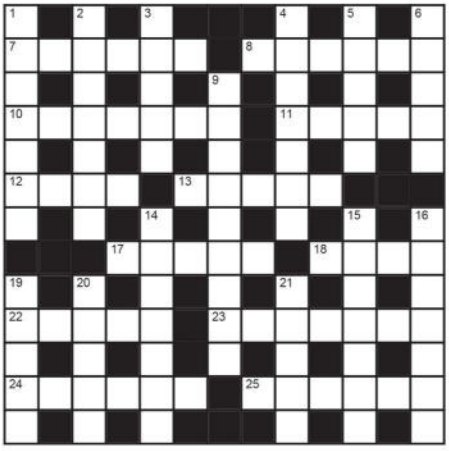
First prize is *The Chambers Dictionary* and £25.
Two runners-up will receive £15.
NB: Hodder & Stoughton and Bookpoint Ltd will be sent the addresses of the winners because they process the prizes.

Moron crossword 425



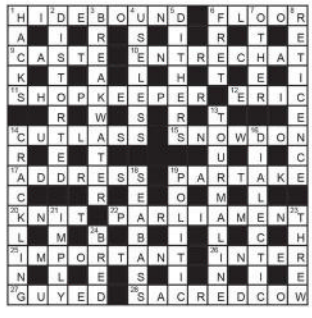
Across

7 A verse in poetry (6)
8 Breathed heavily and deeply (6)
10 Medical injector (7)
11 Rub out (5)
12 What left after losing wheels (4)
13 Attempt; piece of writing (5)
17 Silly mistake (5)
18 (Your) magic power? (4)
22 Equipment for lifting something heavy (5)
23 Make reparation for (7)
24 A song of devotion or loyalty (6)
25 Walking aid (6)

Down

1 Like normally (2,5)
2 Register of salaries (7)
3 Fresh bracing sea air (5)
4 Watering hole after work? (4,3)
5 Ampoule (5)
6 All the best! (5)
9 Agreed break in hostilities (9)
14 Made a move at chess (7)
15 Freedom from vanity or conceit (7)
16 Beetroot soup (7)
19 Leading (5)
20 Panoramic view (5)
21 Love intensely (5)

Genius 423 solution



Winner: Vic Robinson, Hailsham, East Sussex
Runners-up: Judith Evans, Bromyard, Herefordshire; Ray Foxell, Lapford, Devon

Moron 423 solution: *Across:* 1 Carries, 5 Horse (Curry sauce), 8 Radio, 9 Parasol, 10 Education, 12 Dip, 13 Sodden, 14 Whinge, 17 Car, 18 Resurrect, 20 Episode, 21 Ibsen, 23 Evens, 24 Payment. *Down:* 1 Curse, 2 Rid, 3 Isolate, 4 Sepsis, 5 Heron, 6 Residence, 7 Eclipse, 11 Undermine, 13 Secrete, 15 Horrify, 16 Asleep, 18 Roots, 19 Tenet, 22 See.

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Tjolpe Flodqvist, who died last year aged 82, was a mainstay of the Swedish team for nearly 50 years and won European championships. He also translated my 20 *Bridge Lessons* books into Swedish.

This month's deal comes from the 1980 World Team Championships versus Iceland and features Tjolpe on opening lead to Three Notrumps. Which card would you have selected? Choose from these options: (a) ♠7, (b) ♥7, (c) ♦A, (d) ♣6, (e) something else.

Dealer South **North-South Vulnerable**

	North ♠ Q 6 ♥ 6 4 3 ♦ K Q 2 ♣ K 9 7 3 2	
West ♠ A J 9 7 ♥ A J 8 7 ♦ A 7 6 ♣ 6 5		**East** ♠ 5 4 3 ♥ Q 10 2 ♦ 10 9 4 3 ♣ 10 8 4
	South ♠ K 10 8 2 ♥ K 9 5 ♦ J 8 5 ♣ A Q J	

The bidding

South	West	North	East
1NT	Pass	3NT (1)	end

(1) Facing a 12-14 Notrump (as North was), this is optimistic. Pass is indicated.

You could make a case for all four of the above leads. You could choose (a) or (b) – fourth highest of your longest suit, perhaps choosing spades as they're a tad stronger. You could try (c) to have a look at dummy to help you decide which major to attack. Or you could opt for a super-passive club, letting declarer do all the work.

Flodqvist went for (e). Knowing his partner had precious little, West had to hope East had the queen of one of the majors, or perhaps five low cards, but he did not want to guess wrongly and lose the tempo. Flodqvist led the ace of hearts. East followed with the ten to encourage and now he could lead a second (low) heart to East's queen. Declarer ducked and won the third heart that followed. He led the king of diamonds, but West won the ace, cashed the 13th heart and followed with the ace of spades. One down.

Naturally, if a look at dummy and East's heart card indicated there was little future there, West could switch to spades – and that being the slightly stronger suit, West left himself with the option to switch to the most beneficial spade, eg the Jack if dummy held Qxx – in case East held Kxx and declarer 10xx.

ANDREW ROBSON

Competition

TESSA CASTRO

IN COMPETITION No 291 you were invited to write a poem called *Plastic Grass*. The huge number of entries almost ignited the e-mail machine.

Basil Ransome-Davies put the pros and cons: 'While photosynthesis, alas, / Is what it doesn't do, / If you're a fan of greenhouse gas, / This is the grass for you.'

For Robert Morrow, it has appeared 'Now the world has gone to pieces – / River's full of bikes and faeces.' Judith Green's narrator was worried about 'whales and fish and krill / all ingesting toxic chemicals that eventually kill'.

Alec Dingwall, in serious register, declared: 'Doom plastic grass, sane men, lest it turf the graves of all.'

But Con Connell celebrated its suitability for 'walking football' played by the over-60s: 'It's artificial as our knees or hips, / But no complaints will ever cross my lips.'

Commiserations to them, Peter Wilson, Ann Drysdale, Ann Hilton and Adam Wattam, and congratulations to those printed below, each of whom wins £25, with the bonus prize of *Chambers Dictionary* going to Bill Greenwell.

I'm dinking, jinking, right and left –
Rashford outruns Shearer –
When whoops! That artificial weft!
Fetch me your aloe vera!
Ow, turf-burn! Polypropylene
Has left me in a scrape –
Though squeaky-clean and evergreen
It's peeled me like a grape.
So, Mother, bring me muddy knees,
And grass to test my style on,
With divots, furrows – weeds, yes please! –
And not this vicious nylon.
I live for football's ballyhoo –
Yes, one day veins may harden,
Or backache break me. Till they do,
Don't Astroturf our garden.
Bill Greenwell

The catalogue was so beguiling,
Couples quite like us, but smiling;
The choice was simply stupefying;
We decided: we were buying.

Shades of apple, lovat, laurel,
Many hues (including coral),
Branded Blenheim or Balmoral,
A price at which no one could quarrel.

We plumped for something quite dramatic –
Laying it was problematic –
They made us buy a Sweep-o-matic
And warned us that there might be static.

My mowing duties now withdrawn,
I look with sadness at my lawn,
For what I see is all pre-shorn;
Clover, dandelions, pretty daisies ... gone.
Sarah Nute

The forecast for the coming week
Is 'cold and clammy' so I seek
Some inward spark to help me tweak
My cheerful heart, and not out-freak.
But, heavens above, the future's bleak –
My BP's up, my pulse is weak
('Tis crabbed old age of which I speak,
When hope springs an eternal leak).
So why does God such vengeance wreak
Upon a servant past his peak?
Yet am I bless'd, for I am meek.
Although my bones begin to creak,
My stool is firm (I took a peek),
My cats are pretty, lithe and sleek,
My garden bench is weathered teak,
My grass is real, not plastic (yeek!)
Bill Holloway

From goal to goal, unchanging deadly green.
There are no traces of the cleated sneaks.
No weeds or tiny flowers can be seen.
No mucky shirts or shorts. But the park reeks
Of ground-up tyres and polyethylene.
No one gives a hoot as balls are punted
Across the grass so trendy and pristine,
A lawn on which no robin's ever hunted
Beetles, spiders or worms. No sprinklers spray
Droplets of H2O with rainbow stains.
The town, like plastic turf, spreads day by day
And, lacking flora, unmoved when it rains.
No mowers here. No birds disturb the burb.
A kick. A goal. A rousing roar. Superb!
Martin Elster

COMPETITION No 293 Imagine a vegetable at the heart of a murder and write a poem on it, please, called *Vegetable Love*. Maximum 16 lines. We still cannot accept any entries by post, I'm afraid, but do send them by e-mail (comps@theoldie.co.uk – don't forget to include your own postal address), marked 'Competition No 293', by Thursday 4th May.

Education

Gifts

Genealogy

UK Travel

Overseas Travel

Events

Personal

Books & Publishing

Art & Sculpture

Wanted

Societies

Health

Wanted

Genealogy

Clothing & Bedding

Friendship & Dating

Video

Mobility

Wanted

Food & Drink

Gifts

Wanted

Health

Clothing & Bedding

Ask Virginia

VIRGINIA IRONSIDE

Marriage jitters

Q *This sounds such a silly problem. My partner and I have lived together for 15 years after divorcing our respective partners. Suddenly, my partner has asked me to marry her.*

I feel so bad, but the whole idea fills me with horror. I don't want to lose her, but I feel getting married might be bad luck, since we've got on so well so far. She's accusing me of not loving her enough. What do you think I should do?

Name and address supplied

A How much does getting married matter to her? How much does not getting married matter to you? I can't see any way out of this except to discuss it – again and again and again, and preferably with an experienced third party. It would be interesting to discover why getting married has such emotional heft for your partner, and similarly why the idea makes you, clearly, anxious and upset.

Once you have got your deep feelings about the issue out in the open, it'll be easier to understand each other's point of view – and, one hopes, come to some kind of compromise. Such as, perhaps, if you're still together, getting married in five or ten years. Or maybe, just for the moment, getting engaged.

That might, for the moment, be a happy medium.

My dying friends

Q *I have been attending reunions of my university year every five years and am a member of a WhatsApp group. We are all in our late seventies; so there are more and more gaps in the ranks. Another reunion is being talked about, but I have mixed feelings. I used to enjoy them, but I don't relish the prospect of a toast to absent friends who now outnumber the survivors. I am healthy enough to go, but I don't want to spend the evening talking about deaths and illnesses of old friends whom I remember in the flower of their youth. Is it better to stop reunions by agreement or just let them fade away? Should I force myself to go?*

Name and address supplied

A Why don't you fudge it? You could say you're going and then, at the last minute, develop a 'bad cold'. It'll be five years before the next reunion and by then (a) it may not happen, (b) you may have changed your mind and long to see old friends, or (c) you may be one of the 'absent friends' to whom they all raise a toast.

I can't grieve for Dad

Q *Last month, my father died. He'd been ill for a long time and hadn't recognised us for the last year or so. My siblings have all been very tearful and distressed but, for some reason, I haven't felt anything at all. I'm starting to feel as if there's something mentally wrong with me. My sister assures me that if I don't accept my bereaved feelings now, they will come up and bite me later. But I can't. Do you think there's something wrong with me?*

Sheila S, Cardiff

A I barely shed a tear when my father died, and for a long time I thought there was something peculiar about me, because I loved him dearly. There's an expectation of a lot of grieving and tears when someone dies, but we're all different. Now I've come to accept that my reaction is just me. If we set ourselves up to feel that we're normal only if we're like other people, with the same emotions, senses of humour, sexual tastes and so on, we're bound to feel different and unhappy. Look at the number of people who torment themselves because they don't have the apparently happy lives portrayed by other people on Facebook or Instagram.

Now I'm older and dare to probe friends deeper about their real feelings, I find that most of us are a great deal more 'peculiar' than we appear – so 'peculiar', in fact, that sometimes I think that those of us with 'peculiarities' are actually the norm.

Gay abandon

Q *My 50-year-old friend and I would like to go on holiday together, sharing a twin-bedded room. But my husband says that people will think we are lesbians. What do you think?*

Jean F, by email

A Since so many single women share rooms on holidays simply because of the expense, it wouldn't occur to me to think anything of the sort. And, anyway, who cares if people did? Surely your husband is old enough to know it doesn't matter one jot what 'other people' think.

Please email me your problems at problempage@theoldie.co.uk; I will answer every email – and let me know if you'd like your dilemma to be confidential.

The Oldie

The Oldie is published by Oldie Publications Ltd, Moray House, 23/31 Great Titchfield Street, London W1W 7PA

ISSN 0965-2507. Printed in England by Walstead Group. Distributed by Seymour Distribution Ltd, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London EC1A 9PT; www.seymour.co.uk

To order a print subscription, email theoldie@subscription.co.uk, or call 01858 438791, or write to *The Oldie*, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Market Harborough LE16 9EF. **Print subscription rates for 12 issues**: UK £49.50; Europe/Eire £58; USA/Canada £70; rest of world £69.

To buy a digital subscription for £29.99 or a single issue for £2.99, go to the App Store on your tablet or mobile and search for 'The Oldie'.

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The Oldie

Review of Books

Spring round-up of the reviews

Michael Barber revisits the angry young men

Lucy Lethbridge applauds the Pepys of New York

Biography & Memoir * Current Affairs * Music

History * Novels * Children's books

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The Oldie

Review of Books

Issue 63 Spring 2023

Not forgetting...important titles recently reviewed in *The Oldie*

A Tale of Two Monkeys: Adventures in the Art World by Anthony Speelman

The Philosophy of Modern Song by Bob Dylan

King of the Blues: The Rise and Reign of BB King by Daniel de Vise

The Story of Follies by Celia Fisher

Whatever Next: by Anne Glenconnor

Elizabeth Taylor: The Grit and Glamour of an Icon by Kate Anderson Brower

The Road: A Story of Romans and Ways to the Past by Christopher Hadley

Spare by Prince Harry

Victory City by Salman Rushdie

Two Sisters by Blake Morrison

Confessions: Life Re-examined by Edward Stourton

The Earth Transformed: An Untold History by Peter Frankopan

Metamorphosis by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst

Published by The Oldie magazine, Moray House, 23/31 Great Titchfield Street, London W1W 7PA
Editorial Panel: Sam Leith, Lucy Lethbridge, Jane Mays, Harry Mount, James Pembroke
Editor: Jane Mays
Design: Lawrence Bogle
Reviewers: Liz Anderson, Michael Barber, Kate Ehrman, Helen Hawkins, Sam Leith, Lucy Lethbridge, Deborah Maby,Christopher Silvester, Nigel Summerley, Maureen Waller
Publisher: James Pembroke
Advertising: Paul Pryde, Rafe Thornhill, Jasper Gibbons
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COVER ILLUSTRATION: BOB WILSON

Freedom of Expression

It started early this year with Roald Dahl and spawned a tidal wave of wokery in which writers from Ian Fleming to Enid Blyton fell victim to the curse of the re-write, with some authors even choosing to self-censor.

In February, it emerged that that Roald Dahl's publisher Puffin UK had made hundreds of changes to his books 'to minimise offence'.' Augustus Gloop could no longer be called 'fat' nor Mrs Twit 'fearfully ugly'. Soon after, news emerged that 'a raft of sexist and racist terms' were to be removed from Ian Flaming's Bond novels in time for the unreformed spy 's 70th anniversary this year.

In France, Gallimard refused to countenance changes to Dahl's works. While it is not illegal to change a dead author's works, French lawyer Antoine Cheron points out, 'It is "dangerous" for culture. How far back should we go? Baudelaire? Voltaire? The Bible? This seems to be an attack on artistic creation and freedom of expression'.

Happily, this issue of *The Oldie Review of Books* contains a plethora of untampered-with titles.It has been an especially strong season for memoir with powerful childhood reminiscences from poet, Don Paterson and musician and composer, Stephen Hough, along with a compelling account of his savage attack of Covid and subsequent recovery by Michael Rosen.

Our critics also enjoyed vivid accounts of the English and Spanish Civil Wars, a fresh take on the Tudors and a spirited depiction of the Wife of Bath. Heroes and villains include Norman Mailer, Liz Truss, and Matt Hancock. Emily Bearn finds much to relish in the raft of children's literature focusing on the Coronation – and Amber Pearson considers the new phenomenon of 'Witch Lit'.

Meanwhile, we can take heart that while sensitivity authors circle, Puffin has decided to re-issue Dahl in the original and Jilly Cooper has been told by her publisher to insert *more* sex into her new novel. And leave the final word to Sebastian Barry - 'There won't be any literature unless writers are free to have their own sense of responsibility for what they write.'

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Emily Bearn

The Battle of Naseby: 1,000 Royalists died in the decisive battle for the Roundheads

THE BLAZING WORLD
A NEW HISTORY OF REVOLUTIONARY ENGLAND

JONATHAN HEALEY

Bloomsbury,512pp,£25

Healey's popular history of 'revolutionary England' covers the reigns of the Stuart kings from 1603 to 1688. Paul Lay, writing in the *Sunday Telegraph,* said that it 'offers a thrilling panorama of the period, from perspectives high and low, told with a winning combination of impish wit, sound judgment, and serious scholarship.' Similarly, Edward Vallance, in the *Literary Review,* noted that 'Healey's discussion of this weighty subject matter is leavened by his keen sense of humour and eye for the ribald anecdote' as well as the inclusion of 'salty 17th-century language.' He found the book 'zesty and gripping.'

A thrilling panorama told with impish wit

Healey is associate professor in social history at the University of Oxford and the critical reaction to his book suggests that it should be a model for academics seeking a wide readership. His 'prose is precise but colloquial,' wrote Lucy Hughes-Hallett in the *Spectator*. 'He presents complex arguments, but delivers them in a laid back, often jocular manner... He tackles big subjects – religious dissent, the legal system – but hitches them to piquant stories about individuals previously unknown to history... Events were tumultuous, but Healey persuasively shows us that thoughts were as thrilling and sometimes as wild.' For Timothy Mowl, in *Country Life*, the book 'teems with details,' while 'the strength of the narrative is its determination to range nationwide, as metropolitan affairs affected the lives of ordinary folk in the shires; this is history told from the bottom up. Dr Healey deals with the major historical events with assurance and forensic insight.' The result is 'a triumph of exposition, illuminating a blazing time of revolution in which was forged a new world order.' Praising it as 'lively and mischievous', the reviewer for the *Times*, Jessie Childs, concluded that *The Blazing World* is 'a wonderful book, exhaustively researched, vigorously argued and teeming with the furious joy of 17th-century life.'

ON SAVAGE SHORES
HOW INDIGENOUS AMERICANS DISCOVERED EUROPE

CAROLINE DODDS PENNOCK

Weidenfeld and Nicolson,320pp,£22

This is 'a work of historical recovery,' wrote David Olusoga in the *Guardian*. It concerns those people who were brought back to Europe by explorers and colonisers, and 'paints these marginalised figures back on to history's canvas, complicating familiar narratives of 'exploration' and 'discovery.' It introduces us to the Brazilians who met Henry VIII and the Inuit man who was brought to late 16th-century Bristol and hunted ducks on the River Avon. We learn of the thousands of others who arrived as intermediaries and translators, diplomats and servants... In one of her early chapters Pennock urges us to 'imagine the sixteenth century a little differently.' Despite the enormous challenges presented by the sources and the inevitably fragmentary nature of the lives that appear from within them, few books make as compelling a case for such a reimagining.'

For Dominic Sandbrook, in the Sunday Times, On Savage Shores 'isn't just a history book but an earnest polemic, ending with a hand-wringing tirade about western museums as sites of "oppression."Indigenous people are never missing from the records; they have been "erased". (When? Why? We are never told.) Indeed, I suspect many readers will find it preachy, overwrought and sometimes downright ridiculous.'

In discussing 'the flow of goods across the Atlantic,' she warns that even bandying around concepts such as trade implicitly endorses colonial assumptions. 'To follow the siren call of economics,' she says gnomically, would mean 'adopting "a Eurocentric approach" based on western capitalist ways of thinking'. 'The horror! Some people, I suppose, will find this very bracing. But I have to confess that I laughed out loud.'

A Brazilian prince encounters Henry VIII

Christopher Hart, in the *Daily Mail*, argued that 'retrospective finger-wagging, or dividing the past into Goodies and Baddies, is just daft. Still, if you can put up with the authorial one-sidedness, there is much to enjoy in this unusual history of a forgotten corner of our past'.

PIRATE ENLIGHTENMENT, OR THE REAL LIBERTALIA

BUCCANEERS, WOMEN TRADERS AND MOCK KINGDOMS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY MADAGASCAR

DAVID GRAEBER

Allen Lane, 208pp, £16.99

'Let us tell, then, a story about magic, lies, sea battles, purloined princesses, slave revolts, manhunts, make-believe kingdoms and fraudulent ambassadors, spies, jewel-thieves, poisoners, devil worship, and sexual obsession.' So, beguilingly, begins David Graeber's last book, published two years after his sudden death at the age of 59.

A radical anthropologist whose books include *Bullshit Jobs*, about the meaningless tasks so many people perform to earn their corn, Graeber spent his life challenging

Libertalia - an egalitarian utopia by the sea

preconceived ideas about the way we live, move and have our being.

In the 1980's, as part of his doctoral research, he spent much time doing fieldwork in Madagascar, the north-east littoral of which in the early 18th- century provided a safe haven for pirates, who created "Libertalia" – a sort of egalitarian utopia by the sea. Word of this reached Europe and, says Graeber, inspired writers like Defoe and Enlightenment thinkers like Montesquieu.

Pirate Enlightenment is based upon Graeber's doctoral thesis, and a rollicking read it proves. In the *New Statesman*, Justin Smith noted Graeber's 'spirit of wonder and evident love of old adventure stories. Like any true intellectual, he never grew out of his childhood passions, such as reading Defoe, but figured out how to channel them into adult pursuits.'

In the *Los Angeles Times*, Sam Dean says this was Graeber's mission: 'to destabilise our idea of what's possible and show that humans can, and often do, create egalitarian worlds built on points of consensus instead of the sharp end of a cutlass.'

The *Guardian*'s Fara Dabhoiwala doubted whether the pirates were quite as revolutionary as Graeber insists. No matter. 'The chief pleasure of Graeber's writing is not that one always agrees with his arguments about the past. It is rather that, through a series of provocative thought experiments, he repeatedly forces us to reconsider our own ways of living in the present'.

RED MEMORY

LIVING, REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING CHINA'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION

TANIA BRANIGAN

Faber,304pp,£20

Revolution in opera from 1972 Peking

As the Guardian's correspondent in Beijing for seven years, Tania Branigan came to believe that the Cultural Revolution – the savage decade from 1966 until Mao's death in 1976 – was the story behind the story of that nation: repressed, yet omnipresent.

Red Mem*ory* is her detailed reported investigation of the people still grappling with that legacy, which as Yuan Yi Zhu's Times review put it, 'left an unmendable tear in the country's fabric.'

Yuan commended Branigan's patient reporting and her 'unsentimental, unforgiving narrative,' and called the book 'beautifully written and thought-provoking.' The book's 'gratuitous comparisons' with recent outbreaks of Western populism, however, 'made me doubt whether Branigan understood her subject at all [...] You cannot compare the Cultural Revolution to the Tory government or the Brexit campaign or Trump with any decency, you really can't.'

Writing in the *Spectator* Xinran, who as a child lived through the Cultural Revolution, admitted to no such doubts. Branigan's book – and that on the same topic by the academic Wang Youqin – left her in tears, and she said that 'it would be an important step in uncovering the truth' if China's young adults, most now utterly ignorant of the Cultural Revolution thanks to a policy of official amnesia, could read these books. In the *Literary Review*, Jeffrey Wasserstrom agreed. He called it 'not just an engagingly written book but also [...] a much-needed one.'

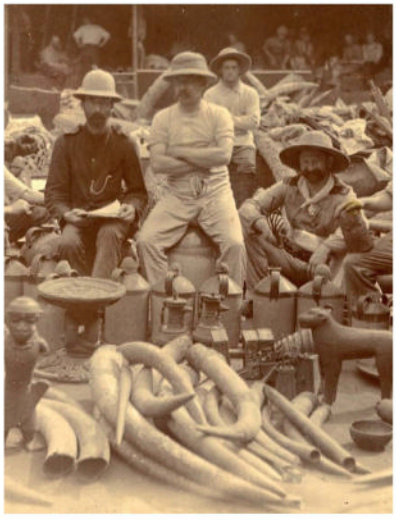
COLONIALISM

A MORAL RECKONING

NIGEL BIGGAR

William Collins,480pp,£25

This book by Oxford ethicist Biggar was originally commissioned by publishers Bloomsbury, then cancelled out of pusillanimity following the backlash to Biggar's opposition to the Rhodes Must Fall campaign. In the Literary Review, Jonathan Sumption praised Biggar's objective approach. 'He confronts the



Trophy hunters: Plunder in Benin

famous horror stories: the Opium Wars, the Benin expedition, the Amritsar massacre, the suppression of the Mau Mau in Kenya. In each case, he sets out the historical context, which is so often absent. He acknowledges the respects in which the charges are justified, but points out in what respects they are unjustified or exaggerated.'

In the online magazine Quillette, John Lloyd said that Biggar's book 'is patiently argued and carefully balanced yet passionately committed to the production of a narrative which replaces denunciation with evidence and understanding. This evidence is often contradictory, but it speaks to an audience interested in grasping how badly and how cruelly things went wrong all over the vast construction that was the British empire. At the same time, it sheds light on the various ways in which empire improved the lives and wellbeing of the peoples it governed.'

In the Times, Trevor Phillips said it 'carries the intellectual force of a Javelin antitank missile. Colonialism is no apologia for empire. It acknowledges the occurrences of cruelty, violence, rapine, repression and sharp practice that characterised much of London's relationship with its colonial possessions. But it also calls for balance, cheekily quoting the father of African literature, Chinua Achebe, on the legacy of colonialism: "Complexity with contradictions — good things as well as bad".'

Biggar acknowledges wickedness in our nation but his version of history calls us to accept the messiness and moral compromises inherent in liberalism. Given that the alternative being presented to most of the former British Empire today is a Faustian pact with Beijing, I find it hard to disagree."

WISE GALS

THE SPIES WHO BUILT THE CIA and CHANGED THE FUTURE OF ESPIONAGE

NATHALIA HOLT

Icon,400pp,£20

Focusing on five American women who joined the Office of Strategic Services in WWII and joined the CIA when it was founded in 1947, Holt's book covers their 'battles for recognition over several decades.' This epic history 'is as rich with the

Wireless operator : Virginia Hall

detail of what the women spies were working on as with the professional barriers they faced,' wrote Helen Warrell in the *Financial Times*. 'The gadgets are straight out of spy fiction: a compact mirror which, when angled correctly, displayed a secret code; a poison extracted from Alaskan clams that could kill when dispensed with a single scratch. While all this makes for a gripping story, the chronological thread jumps, sometimes confusingly, between the four women, shuttling from [Eloise] Page's work surveilling Soviet military capabilities to [Liz] Sudmeier managing a network of intelligence sources in the Middle East and [Mary] Hutchison's efforts to counter Russian influence in Japan. Within this wider historical arc, the women's individual stories risk being lost.'

In his Daily Telegraph review, Jake Kerridge noted that what characterises these women is 'their capacity to recognise that their work is so important that they are prepared to stick at it with little acknowledgement and on half the pay of men doing the same job. Eventually they make themselves indispensable.' Although Holt has 'a weakness for melodramatic cliché' and 'a tendency to state the obvious', her book 'is beautifully organised, skilfully weaving the lives of these five disparate women into a coherent whole, and she imparts a lot of complex technical information with admirable clarity.'

C. B. Santore, in the *Washington Independent Review of Books*, said that the book will appeal to 'history buffs, those interested in national security, and spy-novel aficionados' a judgment echoed by Kathryn Hughes, in the *Sunday Times*, who found the book 'thrilling' and 'as propulsive as classic le Carré'.

THE ADVENTURERS

THE IMPROBABLE RISE OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

DAVID HOWARTH

YALE,400pp£25

Whereas WillIam Dalrymple's 2019 bestseller The Anarchy focused on the East India Company's later hegemony in India, Howarth's Adventurers goes back to the company's 17th-century origins. When the company was formed in 1600, Britain lagged behind Spain as a maritime power and was rivaled by the Dutch. 'While its foreign "factories" (free trade zones that functioned as dependencies) laid the groundwork for colonisation,' wrote Daniel Brooks in the Daily Telegraph, Howarth 'shows how it started out as "a parlous, improbable institution", struggling among the many European trading interests that shaped global commerce for good and ill'. He 'does well to transform bills, logs and itineraries into gripping reading. If he tends towards digression, this is forgivable given the scope of the company's activity... Howarth never shies away from the violence and cruelty that emerged alongside commerce, but this is a well-periodised history that treats the good and bad judiciously... By no means a defence of the empire, this dizzying work makes its emergence all the more remarkable." For Dan Jones, in The Times, the

East India House, London

early company were 'a motley bunch and their corporate structure was far from efficient. Howarth draws neat pen-portraits of officials, such as the first governor, Thomas Smythe, a domineering, Dutch-hating Presbyterian 'who worshipped God and gold with equal fervour'. There are also 'gruesome accounts of clashes between rival traders in the east, including one that features waterboarding and torture with hot candles. Yet it is not exactly easy reading. In trying to make commercial history sexy, Howarth attempts to make each sentence a somersaulting zinger. While this lends a certain musicality to the prose – all guitar solo and no riff, though – after several hundred pages it is outright annoying'. Even so, 'for anyone interested in the origins of the East India Company, and the fine line between respectable trade and lowdown dirty piracy at the turn of the 17th century, Adventurers is essential reading.'

ARCHITECTS OF TERROR

PARANOIA, CONSPIRACY AND ANTI-SEMITISM IN FRANCO'S SPAIN

PAUL PRESTON

William Collins,464pp,£30

Already revered as the pre-eminent English historian of modern Spain, Paul Preston adds to his repertoire with this study focusing on six ideological fanatics who shaped Franco's systematic extermination of those perceived to be internal enemies of the nation, who included not only leftists but also freemasons and Jews. Preston 'introduces us to some less well-known and extraordinarily unpleasant characters,' wrote Patrick Bishop in the *Daily Telegraph*, 'among them Gonzalo de Aguilera, an erudite, aristocratic landowner and cavalry officer who worked as a liaison officer with foreign media during the war. Aguilera was educated in England by Jesuits, passing through, I was startled to learn, my old school Wimbledon College before going on to Stonyhurst.' According to Aguilera, the sewers in Spain's cities should have been 'reserved for those who deserve them, the leaders of Spain, not the slave stock'. Another purveyor of poisonous propaganda was a priest named Juan Tusquets, who falsely

Franco supporters in Salamanca celebrate the occupation of Gijon

accused 'the moderate, piously Catholic President of the Republic, Niceto Alcalá-Zamora, of being both a freemason and a Jew.' Preston's 'revealing' book is 'based on profound knowledge but also shrewd human understanding. As well as exposing the pyschic underpinnings of the Spanish war it also helps us see the world war that followed for what it was: the continuation and culmination of long-brewing political and cultural pathologies.'

Gerard De Groot, in his review for the *Times,* noted that 'the great danger of Spanish fascism' is that 'its proponents often seem like buffoons – cartoon villains unworthy of real fear. Yet these six men were responsible, either directly or indirectly, for slaughtering half- a-million Spaniards. Preston's great skill lies in carefully dissecting these vile characters, providing a very personal and frightening portrait of a movement that seems disturbingly familiar today. This book reveals Preston at the peak of his powers; he's an enormous intellect and a great storyteller who recognises the lessons the past provides."

TOMORROW PERHAPS THE FUTURE

FOLLOWING WRITERS AND REBELS IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

SARAH WATLING

Cape,384pp,£22

While the involvement in the Spanish Civil War of such male writers as George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway is widely known, Sarah Watling has chosen to write about the women for whom this conflict became a defining experience, including Jessica Mitford, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Nancy Cunard, and Martha Gellhorn. 'What drew Watling to these women, wrote Caroline Moorhead in the *Literary Review*, 'was that they chose not to be dispassionate but to take sides.' Although 'group biographies are notoriously hard to write', Watling 'knits together with considerable skill the details of her characters' lives and adventures in Spain.... She also intersperses her narrative with perceptive commentary. Each of these women, as she shows, battled with her own demons.'

Battling fascism with guts and determination

As Alexander Larman put it in his *Observer* review, 'Watling's protagonists are flawed but brave, battling fascism with guts and determination – even if, inevitably, they kept an eye on which of their gruelling experiences would make the best copy.' The *Daily Mail* chose it as their *Book of the Week*, and their reviewer, Ysenda Maxtone-Graham, found that Watling 'brings alive with great vividness a small cast of disparate characters.' For Maxtone-Graham it was 'the slow crushing' of their idealism 'that makes this book such an affecting and sometimes tough read... My picture of Nancy [Cunard] as a

heavy-drinking, boyfriend-slapping socialite was radically altered by reading this account of her unflagging wartime exploits.' Watling 'brings all these passionate characters together with great aplomb.' In the *New Statesman*, Michael Prodger noted that these women went to Spain 'not just to fight fascism or scratch the itch of adventure but also to show what women could do... Watling shows that they did not deal in empty gestures, but experienced both the front line and the panic and strained ennui of the towns and villages.'

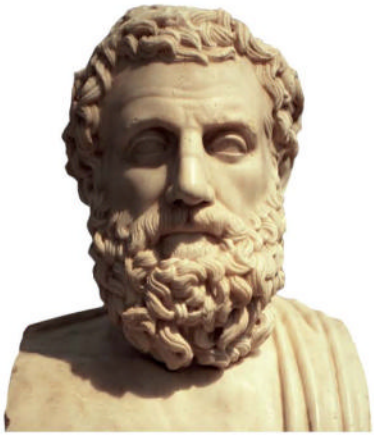
THE TRAGIC MIND
FEAR , FATE AND THE BURDEN OF POWER

ROBERT D KAPLAN

Yale, 160pp,£20

Robert D Kaplan is an American reporter and theorist of international relations whose enthusiasm for the invasion of Iraq is credited with having had a decisive influence on the George W Bush administration. He has come to bitterly regret the hubris of that adventure, and this 'short but profound' book, as Francis P Sempa called it in the *New York Journal of Books*, is his attempt to make sense of the mistake, and of his regret: 'I had failed my test as a realist, on the greatest issue of our time, no less!'

Kaplan's argument in the book is that the great tragedians of the classical world – Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides – had a profound understanding of the human situation, and that in the modern world we have forgotten the lessons they teach us. Those lessons are, roughly, that pride comes before a fall, that we would do well to remember that we are the playthings of fate and that as abhorrent as tyranny might be, anarchy is almost always far worse.



Father of tragedy: Aeschylus

'*The Tragic Mind* may be Kaplan's shortest book,' said Sempa, 'but in one sense it is a synthesis of what he has learned from seeing war up close, studying how statesmen have approached the knowns and unknowns of global politics. and his appreciation of the tragedies that fill the pages of history from ancient times to the present. The statesman who 'thinks tragically from the outset', Kaplan writes, will fear the future 'and is therefore aware of [his] limitations, and thus can act with more effectiveness'.

The Wall Street Journal's Tunku Varadarajan, who called the book 'an act of self-flagellation', detected a whiff of 'self-regard.' Certainly, he wasn't persuaded by Kaplan's thesis 'that the answers to moral questions about the rightness of war are to be found more readily in the classics than in the strategic analysis of present-day experts.'

> Remember, we are but the playthings of fate

Far more enthusiastic was the *New Statesman* John Gray, who declared that 'this spare, elegant and poignant volume has more wisdom in it than any number of turgid studies in "'political science." If there is a single contemporary book that should be pressed into the hands of those who decide issues of war and peace, this is it'.

Ranging widely across the humanities, Kaplan harvests insights from ancient Greek drama, Shakespeare, Melville and other writers who have explored intractable human dilemmas. From the depths of his depression, he has salvaged a cluster of pearls.

TUDOR ENGLAND
A HISTORY

LUCY WOODING

Yale,480pp,£25

For one book to narrate and analyse the reigns of all five Tudor monarchs is a daunting task,' Helen Hackett acknowledged in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 'To add to this an interwoven account of the social and cultural contexts of the period ... might seem impossible, yet this is what Wooding has achieved in this impressive book'.

First Tudor: Henry VII

Not only is the book 'monumental', she continued, but 'the technique of zooming in on striking details and zooming out to debate big questions creates a reading experience that at once engages, enlightens and provokes further reflection.'

Describing the book as 'a radical new history' and 'incredibly ambitious', Daniel Brooks in the Telegraph noted that 'each chapter offers an important nuance backed up by a laudably diverse cast of sources.'

Hailing the book as 'a remarkable achievement', Matthew Lyons in the Literary Review noted that 'hers is a deeply human and intimate account, taking in every level of society.'

'Wooding tries to describe the Tudor world from the bottom up and the top down. And in doing so she may just have produced a classic,' Dan Jones enthused in the Times, 'It is a monstrous task. But Wooding is up to it, because she writes in clear, elegant, purposeful narrative and has a keen eye for weird stuff.'.

'Wooding's book is generously magnificent,' Steve Donoghue wrote in Open Letters Monthly, 'she succeeds so confidently that it's easy to imagine this fat volume becoming the bedrock synthesis for a generation.'

'Dozens of volumes about the Tudors roll out every year,' Jones concluded, 'Few are this serious, this readable and this full of fun'.

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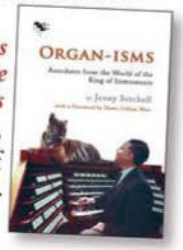

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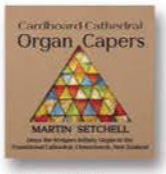

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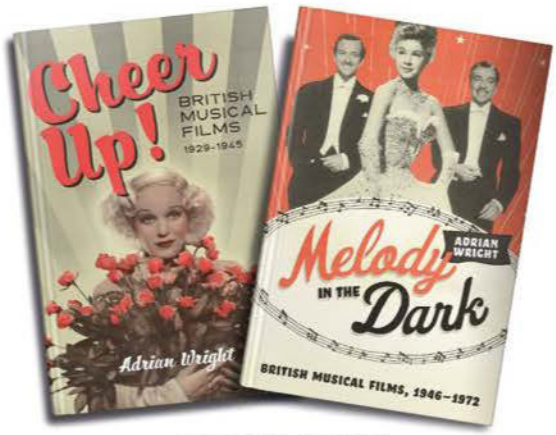

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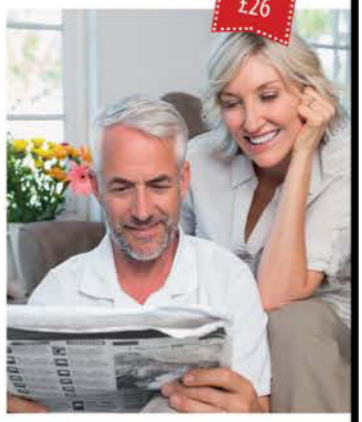

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MUCH EASIER ON THE EYES

LUCY LETHBRIDGE on the adult works of Ludwig Bemelmans

The German artist Ludwig Bemelmans is nowadays best known for his beguiling children's books about the adventures of Madeleine.
But Bemelmans was a wonderful writer, as adept at sketching in prose as he was in illustration. His particular talent was for revealing the battier capers of the wealthy beau-monde into which he seems effortlessly to have fallen from the 1920s to the 1960s.

He is a charming guide to the eccentric, sometimes whimsical, often lonely, lives of the fashionable rich and their servants and dependents.

In two recent reprints of his by Pushkin Press, *Hotel Splendide* (1941) and *To the One I love the Best* (1955), we meet the young Ludwig, good-natured, sunny, and possessing exactly the right ratio of worldly scepticism to happy innocence that makes an effective observer.

He gets invited everywhere and everyone wants to be his friend and with the instincts of a natural writer (and what appears to be an alarmingly good memory for verbatim conversation), he catches poignancy and absurdity in equal measure – he has a particularly good eye for an ingenious hustle.

Hotel Splendide is an account of his arrival in New York in the 1920s. Still in his teens, and with characteristic good fortune, he found a job as a bus boy in one of the city's grander hotels.

In this micro-universe, it is the invisible people who are Bemelmans' dramatis personae. The guests may have the foibles of the very rich but it is the staff, washed up in New York from all over the world, who are just as extraordinary - fantasists, re-inventions and adventurers.

There is a lascivious Romanian magician with a weakness for seducing ballet dancers; a sad Tyrolean, Fritzl, who works in the washroom and longs only to return home wearing a suit made in England. The mysterious and lugubrious Mespoulets ('probably the worst waiter in the world') rules the dining room and it is he who encourages the young Bemelmans to start drawing cartoons, 'anything rather than end up a waiter'.

Bemelmans, right: and the bar he decorated in New York's Carlyle Hotel

There are several subversive bacchanals when the hotel staff move in to the presidential suites for weeks at a time. In one irresistible set piece, the Congolese dish-washer, a figure of hauntingly poetic beauty, appears at a socialite's ball and sweeps her into a mad but exciting dance.

To the One I Love the Best is a memoir of Bemelmans' brief friendship with Lady Mendl, previously known as Elsie de Wolfe. He was an artistic star (it seems to have been a feature of Bemelmans' life and personality that his star always rose) in Hollywood in the 1950s and Elsie Mendl, then 90, was its most prominent hostess – her parties peopled by playboys and stars, pretend princes, wannabes, frauds and hopefuls.

In Bemelmans' accounts, the likes of Charles Boyer are merely walk-ons: it is Munchin the car dealer who can't stop eating who gets the attention. Naturally, when they met, Lady Mendl immediately wanted Bemelmans for her own, re-christening him 'Stevie' but never explaining why. Before long, she has moved him in.

Elsie Mendl was monstrous but glorious. Born in 1859, and presented to Queen Victoria, she lived to preside over the toytown streets of twentieth-century tinseltown.

She was indefatigable, a vegetarian who stood on her head every morning. The first to make interior decoration a profession (and to make a fortune from it), for most of her adult life she lived openly in a Boston marriage with Elizabeth Marbury – credited with being the first ever literary agent.

She married Sir Charles Mendl for his title when she was 60 but always assured Marbury that they maintained separate beds.

Sir Charles is endearingly depicted by Bemelmans, always yearning after the 'ravishing creatures' of Hollywood.

Elsie's deity was Good Taste, the worship of 'suitability, simplicity and proportion', a rebellion against the stuffing and frills of her nineteenth-century childhood. She claimed to have had a tantrum at six when forced to enter a room decorated in William Morris.

A de Wolfe room was green and white, faux eighteenth-century with Chinese wallpaper, twiddly gilt chairs and scatter cushions embroidered with the words 'Never complain, never explain.' No detail of style was overlooked – even the lavatory, which she called the 'unspeakable.'

'A thing of beauty is a joy forever; besides increasing in value every year' is a grainy bit of Elsie wisdom.

She insisted Ludwig called her 'Mother' and referred to herself in this way, in the third person, which added a sinister tenacity to even the lightest conversational exchange. 'Would you terribly mind if Mother asked you for a great favour?', was a typical opening gambit.

But what a gift Elsie Mendl was for a writer. If Bemelmans were not so thoroughly sympathetic and warm- hearted one might say that he skewers her.

And the title he chose for his memoir is characteristically self-deprecating. *To the One I Loved the Best* is the epitaph on every one of the graves of Lady Mendl's dogs.

Coming of age: poet Don Paterson

TOY FIGHTS
A BOYHOOD

DON PATERSON

Faber,384pp,£16.99

The Scottish poet and academic Don Paterson's first foray into memoir was rave-reviewed in all quarters for its robust prose style, its humour, its unflinching honesty and his pin-sharp memory for names and personalities, even in the fog of drugs, prescribed or otherwise. It was 'a memoir in a million', proclaimed John Walsh in the *Sunday Times*, 'yelping with real-life experience.'

The title, John Mullan explained in the *Guardian*, is a kids' game: a mass brawl begun for no discernible reason. It was an apt metaphor, he suggested, for Paterson's early life in Dundee, which involved fights with God, drugs and insanity.

In the *Scotsman*, Stuart Kelly particularly relished Paterson's description of his education: 'a foetus in a blazer' who thought school was 'something we were trying out, like a new kind of cereal.' He welcomed Paterson's candour about teacher sadism, the blighted lives of others, the flawed Scottish government — which had failed to cut sugar tax, he argued, because diabetes is cheaper for the NHS to treat than longevity. 'For an avowed and self-confessed fibber, there is an adamantine truthfulness in his work'.

Paterson's father Russ was his key role model, a hand-colourer of *Beano* and *Dandy* strips, but a country singer at night. Miles Ellingham in the *Financial Times* observed: 'Poverty arrives early in the memoir and doesn't ever leave.'

Sometimes it is subtly referred to, as in Mrs Paterson's pleasure in announcing Donald is taking piano lessons; sometimes it's brutal, as in Paterson's rollcall of his former classmates, some already dead or gravely ill.

Ellingham's only quibble was the author's love of grumpy footnotes about the culture wars. which 'moor the text to the contemporary cultural moment, whereas the rest has a "timeless feel". This is a book that swan-dives into the filthy waters of growing up and resurfaces clear-eyed, bearing pearls'.

ENOUGH
SCENES FROM CHILDHOOD

STEPHEN HOUGH

Faber,272pp,£18.99

Stephen Hough is a renaissance man — indeed he was named by the *Economist* as one of twenty living polymaths: classical pianist, composer and writer. 'Enough,' as the author himself wrote in the epilogue, 'as well as rhyming with my often-mispronounced surname, is a line in the sand: I finish sharing my memories at the point when I start my professional career.'

And in this memoir, as Peter Conrad wrote in the Observer, Hough 'reveals himself as an endearingly humorous, entrancingly lyrical writer.'

Conrad continued: 'Enough is valuable because it verbalises the abstract mystery of music, "free because it flies so high, suggesting answers to questions unasked." But this is more than the autobiography of a virtuoso with a rarefied talent; Hough's memories of growing up in Liverpool in the 1960s will have an echo in your own recollections of your earliest, most avidly impressionable years, no matter where or when you were born'.

Alexandra Coghlan in the *Spectator* agreed: 'This isn't a music memoir. It's a memoir of a man who happens to be a world-class musician. Hough's is a life and career full of singularity, but this is a book about shared experiences: bad teachers and good ones; friends and comrades in arms; the first trip abroad; the pervasive shame and fear of homosexuality of the Aids generation.'

Although Hough doesn't altogether avoid the risk of sentimentalising the past, said Rupert Christiansen in the *Literary Review*, 'his account of his growth as both a human being and one of the great pianists of his generation is nevertheless wonderfully vivid and touching'.

And in an interview with Hough in the *Sunday Times*, Dan Cairns summed up: 'What Hough's memoir makes abundantly, movingly clear is that all roads lead back to his parents, to Cheshire, Chetham's [specialist music school] and the Catholic church [to which he converted]. They don't define him. But they made him. You can hear it in his music. Chaos, creation, catharsis.'

Growing up in 1960s Liverpool: pianist, composer and writer, Stephen Hough

Our sometime PM: Liz Truss

OUT OF THE BLUE
THE INSIDE STORY OF THE UNEXPECTED RISE AND RAPID FALL OF LIZ TRUSS

HARRY COLE AND JAMES HEALE

HarperCollins,336pp,£20

The biography of Britain's shortest-lasting prime minister, whose term of office was mocked by one tabloid as having been outlasted by a lettuce, does not offer much promise. But Harry Cole, political editor of the *Sun*, and James Heale, diary editor of the *Spectator,* have 'cleverly' turned 'a story of surprise victory into a well-researched tragedy of warnings ignored,' wrote Tim Stanley in the *Daily Telegraph*. Truss 'comes across as such a slight character that one wonders if there's a big market to read an entire book about her, but when Cole and Heale get stuck into her fight against Sunak, they offer a masterful, behind-the-scenes perspective on theatre that affected us all.'

A well-researched tragedy of warnings ignored

Observer reviewer Andrew Anthony thought it 'hard to imagine that there is much appetite for knowing more about Truss' and 'even her most ardent supporters could probably do with knowing a little less... The basic story of Truss is by now well established: the geeky, outspoken daughter of a couple of leftish Cambridge graduates, who fell for the contrariness of libertarianism at Oxford, became a Tory and rose rapidly up the party ranks to become prime minister. It's the familiar narrative that is retold here, albeit with some wit, insight and a well-informed ear for the telling detail.'

As Matthew Parris put it in his review for the *Times*, the authors 'never planned a hatchet job,' which 'only adds power to their account... This biography may be about Truss, but a subterranean subplot is the story of two right-of-centre male journalists falling out of love with someone they might have hoped to admire.'

Out of the Blue reads well, clips along nicely, stays interesting and suffers not at all from having had to be written fast; arguably it benefits because it never bogs down. The reader learns a lot from this compact, 300-odd-page story.

THE TASTEMAKER
MY LIFE WITH THE LEGENDS AND GENIUSES OF ROCK MUSIC

TONY KING

Faber, 260pp,£20

'Now in his 80s, King might be rock history's best-kept secret,' said the *Guardian*'s Alexis Petridis, 'a Zelig-like figure whose career in the music industry connects the Beatles and the Rolling Stones to Elton John, Freddie Mercury and the late 1970s zenith of disco. He was there when the Beatles recorded *All You Need Is Love* and met the Maharishi.

L-R Ringo Starr, Tony King, John Lennon

'Born in 1942 into a complicated family — his parents were in fact his grandparents, his Auntie Kay was really his mother — he grew up in Eastbourne, a grammar school boy who decoded his [gay] sexuality with a dictionary and the plays of Tennessee Williams,' said Victoria Segal in the *Sunday Times*.

'He was unstoppable, working in record shops before starting a job at Decca at 16. From putting together sleevenotes he moved to promotions, working for the Rolling Stones manager Andrew Loog Oldham, then George Martin's Air studios.'

King later worked for the Stones for 20 years. Petridis said King 'struck up a lifelong friendship with [drummer] Charlie Watts. This after Watts' initial assessment that he had "never seen anyone as gay as that new guy in the office".'

Callum Crumlish in the *Express* said: 'King "looked after" Lennon during his estrangement from Ono – a period of his life he would later call his Lost Weekend.'

'Drunk and furious after an altercation with Phil Spector while recording his 1975 album Rock 'n' Roll, Lennon had smashed up the house where he was staying,' said Petridis. 'King arrived to find windows broken, gold records shattered and the singer attempting to pull a palm tree out of the ground. He ended up pinning Lennon to the ground: "I never knew you were so strong, dear," Lennon quipped.'

The book has plenty of intimate anecdotes but no real dishing of dirt. 'Names drop like feathers from a marabou cape,' said Segal, 'but King understands his place in this gilded world and knows how to balance irreverent entertainment with respectful discretion.'

TOUGH GUY
THE LIFE OF NORMAN MAILER

RICHARD BRADFORD

Bloomsbury,304pp,£20

Early laurels, it's been said, weigh like lead. Norman Mailer (1923-2007) didn't put it so succinctly. But recalling *The Naked and the Dead*, for which he was paid, aged 24, the equivalent today of about £500,000, he admitted that 'early success cuts you off from ordinary experience, so you seek it in more dramatic ways.' Like stabbing your wife (she declined to press charges). Or sparring with prize-fighters. Or twice running for Mayor of New York.

Like his hairy-chested exemplar, Ernest Hemingway, Mailer was not content to sit at home and write. He performed. One of his books was called *Advertisements for Myself*, a good title for the stunts for which he became (in)famous.

How this nice Jewish 'momma's boy' from Brooklyn morphed into 'the swarthy gangster' Evelyn Waugh encountered in 1961 is told in forensic

Norman Mailer: an 'awful' man but 'a great American writer'

detail by Richard Bradford, an Ulster academic who enjoys cutting down tall poppies. Reviewers were agreed that Mailer had it coming to him: he was an 'awful' man. But he was also a better writer than Bradford gives him credit for.

In the *Daily Telegraph*, Ian Sansom said that Bradford's technique 'is to produce spiteful, sketchy, cut-and-paste biographies, which are momentarily satisfying but which leave a rather bad taste in the mouth.'

The *Guardian*'s Peter Conrad reckoned that Bradford had 'nothing but contempt for Mailer, although he is creepily curious about his sexual forays; at the end he hurtles though his subject's sad final years in a few perfunctory sentences. Even at his maddest Mailer deserves a better memorial.'

It was left to the *New Yorker*'s David Denby to put Bradford's biography and his subject into perspective: 'It would be naïve to suppose that the renewed attention on Mailer had nothing to do with the scandals attached to his name. It would also be naïve to pretend that he was not a great American writer.'

POLITICS, POVERTY AND BELIEF
A POLITICAL MEMOIR

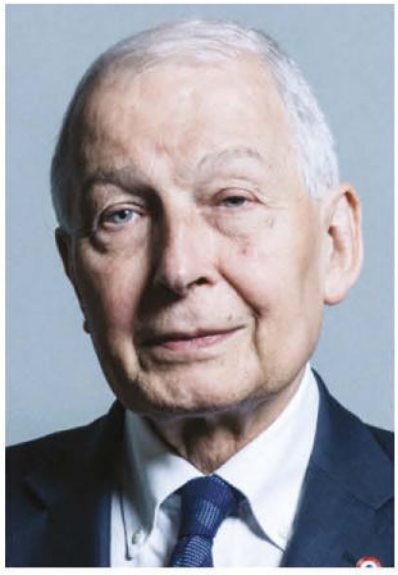
FRANK FIELD

Bloomsbury, 202pp, £20

Frank Field, now Baron Field of Birkenhead, describes this brief memoir as his 'death mask'. He has incurable cancer and could die at any moment. But you could also call it his 'testament', because it explains how, despite his reputation for saintliness, he survived forty years in British politics, that blood sport without a close season.

A committed Christian, Field did not turn the other cheek. Aged 15, and threatened by his violent father with a hammer, he grabbed the hammer and said that if his father tried that again, he would use the hammer on him. Later he showed the same resolve when threatened by Momentum activists in Birkenhead, the constituency he represented for forty years.

In the *Telegraph*, Tim Stanley said that as a young man Field joined the Labour party because it offered the chance to 'transmit religious teaching via social activism', but he 'quickly discovered that the Left, though noble in theory, often puts ideology and tribe before practical steps to reduce poverty.' Hence the reputation he soon acquired for being 'awkward'. However, 'the breadth and seriousness of this short, easy-to-read book is almost embarrassing .... Few MPs have done so much to improve the voters' lives.'



Frank Field: an 'awkward' politician

In the *Times* Quentin Letts confirmed that Field was 'never a my-party-right-or-wrong man ... When he rose during the Commons debates, we reporters never knew which side of an argument he would support.'

But while wishing more MPs were 'as amiable and independent-minded as Field', whom he describes as 'a kindly light to lighten our politics', Letts cautioned that 'every system does still need its scoundrels and chancers. If this book lacks the smack of certainty, that may be because philosophical openness is ultimately incompatible with political purpose. To get things done in government, you probably need to be more brutally decisive than thoughtful Field could ever allow himself to be.'

THE WIFE OF BATH
A BIOGRAPHY

MARION TURNER

Princeton,336pp,£20

Marion Turner, author of an acclaimed biography of Chaucer, now puts under the spotlight the ribaldly independent and red-stockinged Wife of Bath, Chaucer's most celebrated creation.

As Erin Maglaque put it in the *New York Times*, 'she is unlike any female character ever written before her, neither princess nor witch nor damsel in distress.' When we meet her on her way to Canterbury, Maglaque went on, 'Alison has been married five times, having outlived each of her husbands and inherited much of their wealth. She is a clothmaker, a powerful figure in one of the most lucrative industries in 14th-century England; she has many friends, reflects on aging, is a wickedly funny storyteller, unapologetically loves sex.' Turner calls her 'the first real woman in English literature' yet 'Alison's wit and disarming voice make her anything but ordinary.'

In the *Literary Review*, Carolyne Larrington applauded a 'wonderful'

Bawdy and powerful: theWife of Bath

biography that is 'informative, clear-sighted, entertaining and as opinionated as its subject.'

Susie Goldbrough in the *Times* also raved about it: 'a small literary miracle.' She was among a few reviewers who thought Turner's own prose could have done with a polish ('there are a few "hilariouslys" that aren't all that hilarious') and wondered if the exhaustive catalogue of the Wife's literary afterlives was necessary in a book for non-academic readers.

But Mary Wellesley in the *Daily Telegraph* thought the book triumphantly overcame its academic origins. 'Turner's learned and deeply researched book is not shy of specialist terminology, so this is a book pitched at those with some degree of familiarity with medieval literature, rather than the general reader. But it remains very readable, with a joy, vitality and humour reminiscent of the Wife herself'.

GETTING BETTER

LIFE LESSONS ON GOING UNDER, GETTING OVER IT AND GETTING THROUGH IT

MICHAEL ROSEN

Ebury, 272pp, £16.99

Michael Rosen's latest is billed as both a self-help manual and a memoir. It details his long bout of Covid, including a 40-day induced coma, from which he awoke realising he had to find ways of 'getting through.'

James McConnachie in the *Sunday Times* gave examples of this advice — from stretching like a cat to learning to adjust your grip on things that hurt, as you would a plastic bag that's cutting into your fingers. He praised Rosen's offbeat voice, skittish yet thoughtful, and his exceptional storytelling, which circles an incident, then alights on its emotional centre.

Reviewers listed the incidents Rosen, now 76, has had to confront: the impact of the holocaust on his family; the loss of his BBC job; his undiagnosed hypothyroidism; the sudden death of his 18-year-old son Eddie from meningitis.

The description of the latter was hard to read, said Marianne Levy in *inews*, but 'hard in the best possible way, for some of the depths of grief Rosen has plumbed, and for the energy with which he mourns.'

In the *Guardian*, Fiona Lensvelt praised this undogmatic search for ways to express our troubles. 'We feel his doubts, his uncertainty and his curiosity,' a process McConnachie saw as Rosen's way of countering his

> A belief that terrible things should be met with silence

family's belief that terrible things should be met with silence. Rosen urged us to 'acknowledge, confront and take action' and not to accept feeling sad: 'Being sad was a way of sending a message to myself to do nothing.' In this, McConnachie said, the book suited the national need to process what Covid had done.

The advice ending each chapter, said Levy in *inews*, might appeal more to those seeking help than to those wanting a chronicle of the author's life. But 'when Rosen recounts how his own actions have given him help and hope, the two genres fuse and the result is both uplifting and quietly profound.'

SIDNEY REILLY – MASTER SPY

BENNY MORRIS

Yale,208pp,£16.99

'So many legends have been connected to the espionage agent Sidney Reilly—most famously, that Ian Fleming modelled James Bond after him—that it's no easy feat to establish the facts of the life he actually led. Further muddying Reilly's trail are the countless lies he himself spread,' said Diane Cole in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Clare Mulley in the *Spectator* said of Reilly: 'Born Sigmund or Schlomo Rosenblum (in the 1870s), he spoke possibly six languages and identified at different times as an Englishman, an Irishman, a Greek or Turkish merchant, a German machine-tool operator and a Tsarist officer. In fact he came from a Ukrainian Jewish family, but... devoted his life to making love and money and, with only slightly greater dedication, fighting Bolshevism as an MI6 spy.

'(His) colourful life was spent against the changing backdrop of Shanghai, Tokyo, Manila, Rio, Paris, London and various parts of Russia.'

'In need of money to support his extravagant lifestyle and his many mistresses,' said Cole, 'he posed more

Sidney Reilly: ace of spies?

than once as a professional chemist purveying dubious patent medicines. As a spy, his numerous undercover identities were simply part of the job, whether he was working for Russia, Japan or Britain.

'By the time World War I began, Reilly had become a British citizen, but the only side he appeared to be on was his own, making money as an international arms broker.'

Reilly, said Mulley, 'oiled the wheels of the war industry trade between Russia, Germany and Britain, making a fortune on the side.' Involved in an unsuccessful plan to assassinate Trotsky and Lenin, 'Reilly escaped back to London with a death sentence over his head,' said Cole. But he was lured back to Russia in a Soviet sting in 1925 and 'communist agents captured, interrogated and finally executed him'.

Grammar schools: going, going, gone?

A REVOLUTION BETRAYED

HOW EGALITARIANS WRECKED THE BRITISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

PETER HITCHENS

Bloomsbuy Continuum,224pp,£20

The post-WWII grammar school system lasted only twenty years before the Labour Party started to dismantle it, with education minister Anthony Crosland vowing 'to destroy every fucking grammar school in England. And Wales. And Northern Ireland.' There were 1,300 such schools in 1965; today, only 163. 'What makes the book fascinating', wrote Tomiwa Owolade in the *New Statesman*, 'is that Hitchens, who now describes himself as a socially conservative social democrat, invokes an old left-wing defence of grammar schools to support his case for reviving academic selection; his arguments are underpinned by a certain kind of idealism. 'The Conservative Party', he writes, has 'no particular belief in the virtues of academic selection. If a return to such selection is to come about, it will have to come from the left.'

In the *Critic*, Georgia Gilhooly suggested 'one reason why the pro-grammar cause has never been thoroughly resurrected, is that there is no obvious person or party to blame for their betrayal. As Hitchens details, Labour radicals and the inertia of Tories – including multiple Prime Ministers who owed their social climb to selective schooling – made sure the destruction of the grammar epoch was a thoroughly ecumenical effort.'

Spectator reviewer David Kynaston found that 'at its heart' this is 'a history book with attitude, not a polemic, and has much to offer about an undeniably fascinating and significant episode. For instance, how the postwar baby boom reduced the likelihood of getting a grammar school place, inevitably to considerable middle-class dismay; how Conservative politicians (arguably the true villains of the Hitchens version) picked up on the dismay and became notably tepid defenders of the grammars; and, perhaps most originally in terms of the historical debate, using personal testimony to show how the secondary moderns (for children who had failed, or not even taken, the 11-plus exam) were in evolving practice far from the lazy stereotypes of sink schools, blackboard jungles and factory fodder.'

AND THEN WHAT?

INSIDE STORIES OF 21ST CENTURY DIPLOMACY

CATHERINE ASHTON

Elliott & Thompson, 233 pp, £20

'For the HRVP* job we need a Brit and a woman from left-of-centre politics,' Jose Manuel Barroso, then EU Commission president, told Catherine Ashton, as she was plucked from relative political obscurity to be the EU's chief diplomat.

Simon Tisdall in the *Guardian* suggested the anecdote 'is typical of Ashton's self-effacing approach to her job,' arguing that her quiet diplomacy was often able to 'inch negotiations forward.'

Luke Harding in the *Observer* agreed: 'The assumption was that she would be hopeless. In fact she proved to be a consummate diplomat: quietly effective, focused on detail … She was interested in getting things done, rather than grandstanding. And painfully aware that there were "no perfect solutions" to complex issues.' He found it 'an enjoyable read,' offering 'a colourful peek into the world of summits and high-level negotiations.'

'Though there are admissions of failure, there is little discussion of times when the EU might have been on the wrong side morally,' Sally Hayden suggested in the *Irish Times*. 'Migration policy, notably, is not discussed'.

Colin Freeman in the *Telegraph* noted that 'she played the "nobody" card to good effect — acting as a quiet consensus-builder, who massaged other leaders' egos and cajoled them towards agreement.'

'However,' he concluded damningly, 'the very qualities that made Ashton a reasonable diplomat limit her powers as a memoirist. Ashton is no Alan Clark or Chris Mullen — there is little juicy gossip or score-settling.... The book gives a much-maligned politician a chance to set the record straight. I can't imagine it will generate her many extra bookings on the speaking circuit.'

*High Representative Vice President

BLOODBATH NATION

PAUL AUSTER AND SPENCER OSTRANDER

Faber,160pp,£25

'Part memoir, part essay', Auster's book offers a reflection on the role that the gun has played in [American] history, society and the novelist's own life,' wrote Gary Younge in the *Guardian*. For example, we discover 'that while there were no guns in the Auster home, there was a significant, if rarely mentioned, gun death in the family's history: his grandmother shot his estranged grandfather in front of his uncle.'

He insists that the United States needs to have 'an honest, difficult national conversation' about gun control, but 'instead he takes us on a journey that passes by the second amendment, slavery, Native American genocide, Vietnam, the Black Panthers, Black Lives Matter, Donald Trump, neoliberal globalisation and much more... Auster, one of the finest storytellers in the English language, makes for an

Paul Auster: no answers on gun control

informed and enlightened companion as he meanders through the subject. But his failure to signal a destination, let alone arrive at one, leaves the reader lost and feeling as hopeless as when they started.'

The book contains five essays and is illustrated by Spencer Ostrander's photographs of fifty mass shooting sites. Auster is a writer known for being 'more cerebral than empathetic', explained Stuart Kelly in the *Scotsman*, and *Bloodbath Nation* 'is, almost, a work of polemic but Auster resists this and works for an achingly perfected balance and nuance, which is nowhere in the current debate and therefore commendable in and of itself.'

Lionel Shriver, who reviewed the book for the *Times*, sympathised 'with Auster's dismay,' but found his 'lament' frustrating. 'Wearing his left-wing politics on his sleeve, the author is preaching to the converted... Infuriatingly intractable, America's mass shooting epidemic is as exhausting as it is horrific. So maybe what most recommends this volume is the fact that it's short.'

THE PANDEMIC DIARIES

THE INSIDE STORY OF BRITAIN'S BATTLE AGAINST COVID

MATT HANCOCK WITH ISABEL OAKESHOTT

Biteback,592PP, £20

While the best political diarists reveal their vulnerability and 'capture how it felt in the heat of the moment, however mortifying it might be to read in retrospect,' wrote Gaby Hinsliff in the *Guardian*, former Health Secretary Matt Hancock 'never actually kept a diary but hasn't let that stop him publishing one'. The result is 'a book concocted after the event (but before the public inquiry) with the help of journalist Isabel Oakeshott from a mishmash of old papers, notes and emoji-laden WhatsApps. And with the selective benefit of hindsight, what the former health secretary mainly sees is – surprise! – all the times he was brilliantly prescient, and all the times his Downing Street nemesis Dominic Cummings wasn't'.

Having Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings as bosses 'is a fate I would not wish on anyone,' wrote Robbie Smith in his review for the *Evening Standard*. 'But I have to admit, after struggling through this book, in moments of weakness I wished it on Matt Hancock... In rushing out a book, attacking his opponents, justifying himself, and focusing the spotlight (both intentionally and not) squarely on him, Matt Hancock has insulted those who died and those who suffered'. *New Statesman* reviewer Rachel Cunliffe was especially sickened by the 'epic love story' between Hancock and Gina Coladangelo (the woman he was caught breaking Covid regulations with, thus leading to his resignation and the end of his marriage). 'Using what's meant to be an inside account of the worst health crisis in modern history as a way to dramatise a love story in which our gallant pandemic-busting hero finds the woman of his dreams isn't just crass,' concluded Cunliffe. 'It's pathetic.' Hancock 'had a unique opportunity to tell us things we didn't already know and help his successors do better next time', but has 'squandered it in favour of his own personal redemption narrative'.

The way we were: coping with Covid

THE SNAKEHEAD

AN EPIC TALE OF THE CHINATOWN UNDERWORLD AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

PATRICK RADDEN KEEFE

Picador,421pp,£10.99

'Thrumming beneath this tale of sunken cargo ships, gangland executions and human smugglers is the enduring appeal of the American dream,' Will Lloyd wrote in the *Times*. 'What would migrants risk to get there?'

The most sophisticated smuggling operation of all time, shipping desperate Chinese migrants to the US, came to grief when in 1993 the cargo ship Golden Venture, with 286 undocumented Chinese aboard, ran aground off the coast of New York.

At the heart of this trade was Sister Ping, responsible for bringing at least 3,000 illegal migrants to America and in the process making a fortune of $40 million: as Lloyd noted, she was both 'a facilitator and an exploiter.' Tim Adams in the *Guardian* was impressed by the 'indefatigability' of the author's 'approach to storytelling', Yet, he argued, 'the element of this story that Radden Keefe's account never quite brings to life is the unfathomable ambition, the desperate need, that causes people to take their life in their hands for the hope of a better one.'

Writing in the *New York Times* when the book was first published in the US in 2009 — this updated edition marks the first UK publication – Samuel G. Freedman described it as 'bracing, vivid, but flawed: it promises a work about the Chinatown underworld *and* the American dream. On the first topic, Keefe absolutely excels. On the second, he fails — because he never quite brings the characters of the Golden Venture's passengers to life, the horrors they endured, or what motivated them.

'*The Snakehead* is a timely, powerful and thoroughly researched book,' Ray Burke noted in the *Irish Times*, while *Publishers Weekly* said that 'with the immigration debate still boiling, this exploration of how far people will go to achieve the American dream is a must-read.'

Lawrence Bogle

A look back at anger

MICHAEL BARBER on the legacy of the angry young men

Over the past few years diversity in publishing has become a hotly debated topic, the complaint being that the industry is still 'hideously' white, middle-class and predominately heterosexual.

In the early Fifties people didn't talk about diversity as we understand it, but many of them recognised that post war fiction failed to reflect the age of the common man. Evelyn Waugh might grumble about 'the sergeants' taking over, but he forgot about Parnassus. That was still off limits to other ranks.

No wonder a young provincial scribbler like Malcolm Bradbury experienced 'raging bitterness' on being told that because he was at a redbrick university like Leicester, and not Oxford or Cambridge, he would struggle to succeed as a novelist.

What was needed was a new sort of hero, who would generate the same shock of excitement that greeted the early poems of W.H. Auden. Ideally he should possess a built-in bullshit detector, the better to discomfit his oppressors, typical of whom is Professor Welch, the pretentious madrigal singing phoney who lords it over 'Lucky' Jim Dixon.

Beer drinking, jazz loving, girl chasing, Jim says things about his elders which hadn't been said publicly before, things which leave you in no doubt that he doesn't consider them his betters.

Somerset Maugham, then aged 80, took it personally, calling Jim and those like him 'scum'. To begin with he thought that Amis was on his side and congratulated him on identifying the 'emergent barbarism that was threatening us all.' It was only later that he realised that Amis was celebrating Jim and Co, not decrying them.

But Jim's 'come off it' attitude struck a chord with stroppy State-aided students like Bradbury, the 'white collar proletariat' stigmatized by Maugham. These malcontents began to question deference, whose decline now began.

Amis claimed no credit for this, insisting that there was nothing 'manifesto-ish' about *Lucky Jim*. It was meant to make people laugh, which thousands of them did. Unlike Jim, he didn't hate Mozart – only the sort of people, like Professor Welch, who thought that liking Mozart made them special.

But, inevitably, Amis came to be seen as an Angry Young Man, not least because Ken Tynan, who had enjoyed Lucky Jim, began by invoking Maugham's remark about 'scum' in his rave review of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Other reviewers also bracketed Osborne's hero, Jimmy Porter, with Jim Dixon, and the Angries' bandwagon began to roll.

Meanwhile there were new kids on the block whose heroes had more in common with the common man than Jim Dixon, who was, lest we forget, a university lecturer. The books they wrote dealt with what Richard Hoggart, an authority on working class culture, called 'the real world of work and men's pleasures.'

1956: when social realism came to a cinema near you

Young Turks often turn into Old Farts

Take Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, whose hero, Arthur Seaton, works at a bicycle factory in the Midlands. A sinewy six-footer, handy with his fists, Arthur likes beer, married women and clothes. He hates all bosses and their lackeys like the rent collector, and despises any man who can't hold his liquor or his woman.

Sillitoe's bestselling book was made into an acclaimed film that launched the career of Albert Finney, who said of himself, 'What I want is a good time. All the rest is propaganda'.' Arthur Seaton would have agreed with this, and so too would Arthur Machin and Joe Lampton, the heroes, respectively, of *This Sporting Life* and *Room at the Top*, two other bestsellers that also became successful films.

Arthur Machin plays professional Rugby League, as much a part of the northern industrial landscape as collieries and mills.

A lathe operator like Arthur Seaton, he takes up the game to become a local hero, but in doing so cuts himself off from his landlady, a grieving widow, who won't be turned into one of his possessions.

The son of a miner, David Storey, the book's author, played League to support himself as an art student at the Slade, commuting from London to Leeds and back every week-end. It was to try and come to terms with this north/south dichotomy that he began to write.

John Braine did not share Richard Hoggart's concern for the welfare of the working man. Indeed he claimed that the reason *Room at the Top* was such a success was because he portrayed Joe Lampton as a callous opportunist, not the 'martyred figure' liberal critics expected a working class hero to be.

A clerk in the Borough Treasurer's department, Joe is determined to end up in Worley, a prosperous suburb where muck is kept well away from brass.

Fortunately he has one quality money can't buy: a way with women. This is his capital, and the return he gets on it is large enough to procure him a place at the top. But there's one item he hasn't costed, his love for an older woman who kills herself when he ditches her for the daughter of a local bigwig. He 's saddled with a debt he can never pay off.

Young Turks often turn into Old Farts and this was certainly the case with John Braine and Kingsley Amis, both of whom came to take themselves very seriously.

But Amis at least could still laugh at himself, as this anecdote shows. He'd been out to lunch with an old Oxford mate who was in the Cabinet Office and who had at his disposal a large chauffeur-driven motor.

When they got back to No 10, somewhat the worse for drink, Amis's mate ordered the chauffeur to drive Amis home.. As he was dozing off in the back, Amis had a sudden thought: 'If Lucky Jim could see me now!'

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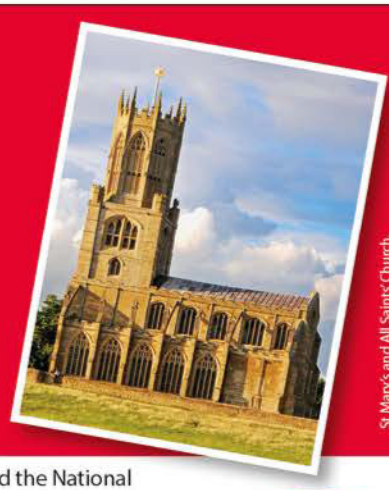

St Mary's and All Saints' Church, Fotheringhay, Northamptonshire © Bob Stewart.

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BATTLE ELEPHANTS AND FLAMING FOXES

ANIMALS IN THE ROMAN WORLD

CAROLINE FREEMAN-CUERDEN

History Press, 280pp, £20

Animals played a large part in the history of the Roman world — think, for example, of Rome's founders Romulus and Remus, who were suckled by a she-wolf; Hannibal, who crossed the Alps with 37 elephants; the geese who saved the day when their honking alerted the Roman guards to the invading Gauls.

As Daisy Dunn described in the Spectator, Caroline Freeman-Cuerden's commonplace-type book is a 'jumble of intriguing quotations and snippets arranged by animal — followed by chapters on chariot racing and the place of animals in medicine, fashion and the army, as pets and, shudder, meat'.

Dunn thought it a 'Did You Know?' kind of book, 'very chatty and informal.' And that the cornucopia of stories and anecdotes, taken from both poetry and prose, was 'lovely'.

'Drawing on a large range of sources — not just the predictables like Pliny, Cicero and Suetonius, but less familiar names such as the agriculture writer Columella, the physician Dioscorides and the vet Vegetius,' wrote Patrick Kidd in the Times, 'Freeman-Cuerden curates a fascinating menagerie, from a great whale beached at Ostia to the smallest parasite found by archaeologists on ancient nit combs. But he added: 'some might find her informal style… a touch too accessible (there is something of the *Horrible Histories* about it) but it rewards dipping.'

PET REVOLUTION

ANIMALS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN BRITISH LIFE

JANE HAMLETT AND **JULIE MARIE STRANGE**

Reaktion , 256pp, £20

The two authors are both history professors — Hamlett at Royal Holloway, University of London, and Strange at Durham University. So they should be well placed to tell, as the publisher put it, the 'story of the "pet revolution" alongside other revolutions — industrial, agricultural, political — to highlight how animals contributed to modern British life.'

The book describes the growth of pet foods and medicines, the rise of pet shops and the development of veterinary care creating the pet economy. Furthermore, Hamlett was principal investigator in a project that explored the role of pets in British family life between 1837 and 1937 and looked at the emergence of new kinds of pets.

In the UK, in 2022, some 62 per cent of households owned a pet, 34 per cent a dog, and 28 per cent a cat. As Nick Redman in the *Daily Mail* wrote: 'Our reputation as a nation of animal lovers seems secure.'

He went on to detail some nuggets from the book: in the 19th century, for example, 'A writer visiting an exotic wildlife shop in London's East End was offered an armadillo. If it failed as a pet, she was assured, she could always eat it.' He continued: 'Hamlett and Strange tell the story of a criminal facing a long jail sentence. He pleaded with his wife to bring his son and his pet owl to the prison to say their farewells. If only one was allowed to visit, she was to choose the owl'.

Priorities, eh?

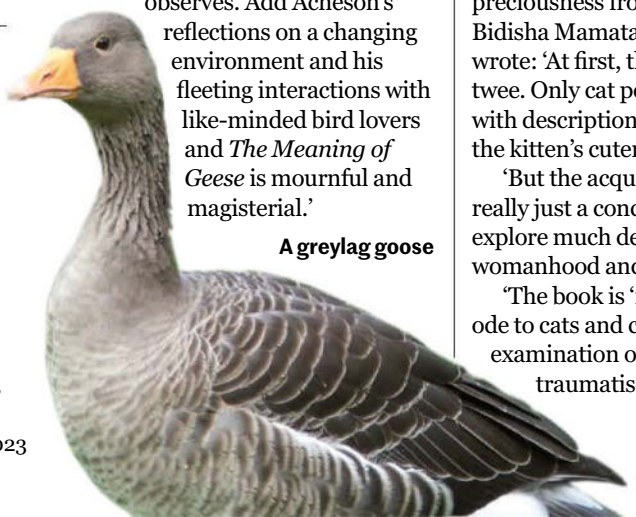
THE MEANING OF GEESE

A THOUSAND MILES IN SEARCH OF HOME

NICK ACHESON

Chelsea Green, 230pp, £20

Nick Acheson is a naturalist, conservationist and environmentalist, and lives in north Norfolk; for this, his first book, he spent several months on his mother's ancient bike counting and identifying wild geese during the autumn and winter of 2020 and 2021. 'This diary of that time,' wrote Ben East in the *Observer*, 'is quite beautiful in its detail of the pink-foot, brent and snow geese he observes. Add Acheson's reflections on a changing environment and his fleeting interactions with like-minded bird lovers and *The Meaning of Geese* is mournful and magisterial.'



A greylag goose

Jasper Rees in the *Telegraph* called the book 'a charming account of a winter's attritional goose-watching'. He continued: 'Acheson is a goose nerd…who caught the bug as a boy when introduced by a teacher to dark-bellied brent geese as they scoured Norfolk's salt marshes.

'As an adult he migrated away to Bolivia to work in conservation for a decade until on a trip back he saw a brent and took it as a sign to continue the good work at home.'

Rees wrote that while this is a book about geese, their fluctuations, their taxonomies and so on, it is also one about 'obsession and community and, inevitably, climate change. With an increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius,' Acheson projects, 'Norfolk will one day be too hot for pinks.'

THE YEAR OF THE CAT

A LOVE STORY

RHIANNON LUCY COSSLETT

Tinder Press, 320pp,£18.99

During the pandemic, *Guardian* columnist Rhiannon Lucy Coslett and her husband adopted a cat, Mackerel, which to her surprise she grew to care for obsessively.

According to the Guardian's Alex Clark, 'Keeping this defenceless creature alive is a way of confronting her own terrors and ambivalences – a way to think deeply about the PTSD that engulfed her after an unknown man attempted to kill her in the street when she was 23, and which resurfaced when she was caught up in terrorist attacks in Paris; forced to endure lockdown separation from friends and family and to navigate the clash between her overwhelming desire to have a baby and her fear that she is "too mad" to undertake motherhood.'

Like other reviewers, Clark had to head off at the pass any charge of preciousness from non-cat-people. As Bidisha Mamata in the *Observer* wrote: 'At first, the premise seems twee. Only cat people will be onboard with descriptions of little Mackerel the kitten's cuteness.

'But the acquisition of a pet is really just a conceit for Cosslett to explore much deeper issues around womanhood and society'.

'The book is 'not so much a cosy ode to cats and cat ladies as an honest examination of Coslett's traumatised yet resilient self.'

Music

Beethoven in 1815

WHY BEETHOVEN
A PHENOMENON IN 100 PIECES

NORMAN LEBRECHT

Oneworld,352pp,£20

'Lebrecht, in this glorious study of Beethoven, [takes] 100 different pieces by the composer, spinning around them a heady mixture of facts, comedy and tragedy,' said Jenni Frazer in the *Jewish Chronicle*.

He 'explores Beethoven in six parts—as himself, in love, immersed, immured, in trouble, and inspired,' said *Kirkus Reviews* magazine. 'In each chapter, the author provides biographical information related to a particular piece of music, his insightful and emotionally charged interpretations, interesting stories related to the piece, and recommended recorded versions.'

For example, said Dalya Alberge in the *Observer*, 'Lebrecht presents evidence that the Bagatelle No 25 in A minor has been known as Für Elise (For Elise) purely due to a misreading of the dedication on the now lost 1810 manuscript.

'He argues that Babette Bredl, a Munich teacher who owned the manuscript in 1865, was absent-mindedly thinking of her own granddaughter, Elise, when she read out the scrawled dedication to a visiting academic, Ludwig Nohl... he copied it out and included it in his 1867 Beethoven volume.'

There is a suggestion that the piece may actually have been written for one of the composer's numerous unrequited loves. 'Lebrecht gives us an almost complete catalogue of Beethoven's many (many, many) hopeless attempts at love affairs', said Frazer. 'He fell for various unattainable women, including Therese Malfatti,' said Alberge, who quotes Lebrecht as saying, 'If you're one of those people who goes around renaming things, then [Für Elise] should probably be Für Therese. But what's the point? If the music is for anyone, it is for everyone.'

Frazer's verdict was that Lebrecht, 'arguing persuasively that no modern music, from Wagner to Nina Simone via Michael Jackson, would exist without [Beethoven], brings this towering musician deliciously to life.

QUARTET
HOW FOUR WOMEN CHANGED THE MUSICAL WORLD

LEAH BROAD

Faber,480pp,£20

After years of obscurity, women in classical music seem to have become a hot topic. According to Leah Broad, the conventional view had been, that 'it was a biological impossibility for women to manage the kind of abstract thought associated with composition.'

In this group biography, she evokes those prejudices and obstacles faced by women in classical music.

MacAffee, writing in the *Financial Times* admired Broad's style; she 'deftly handles the complexities of different lives and personalities, placing her subjects in the musical and social context of their time.' She liked Broad's 'rare gift for eloquent evocation of the music itself,' and how she addresses 'the key question (was the work any good?) resoundingly in the affirmative.'

Erica Jeal in the *Guardian* also appreciated the need for this book; 'Emphasising that female composers did (and do) exist, even though they have often been left out of musical history, is what drives this biography of extraordinary women.

'The lives of four pioneering English women composers spanning the late 19th to late 20th century are interwoven 'into a chronological account that to some extent doubles as a social history of Britain.'

Ivan Hewitt in the *Telegraph* found this 'a clear-eyed, intelligent book which appears at a timely moment. But while he doubted that these four women had really changed the musical world he agreed that 'they blazed a trail,' which is surely 'praise enough.'

Travel

LA SERENISSIMA
THE STORY OF VENICE

JONATHAN KEATES

Apollo,496pp,£40

'More than a labour of love, this is a work of adoration, 'wrote Lauro Martines in the *Times Literary Supplement*. 'Jonathan Keates thus joins the queue of 19th-century writers – Ruskin, Horatio Brown, Byron, George Sand and others – who fell in love with the watery city. A near-worshipful attitude, evident throughout *La Serenissima*, is unusual in a historian, but it can add to the pleasures of reading.

'Keates's 'story' is a stream of stories and anecdotes that seek to give colour and clout to the narrative. In this aim the book is also graced by a series of splendid illustrations'.

Venice landmark: the Rialto bridge

For Keith Miller, in *The Art Newspaper*, this is 'a sumptuous and authoritative history' and Keates 'proves an unfailingly urbane and largely trustworthy cicerone.'

However, the book has 'an implicit distaste for most things modern' and 'more might have been made of composer Luigi Nono, architect Carlo Scarpa, Russian-American poet Joseph Brodsky, and the many other brilliant people for whom Venice has been a refuge and an inspiration,'

The Economist's anonymous reviewer noted that Keates is 'like a savvy gondolier who "steers from topic to topic," giving his readers enough information for a basic understanding of each before slipping down the next enticing cultural, political, military or diplomatic canal. His love of the city radiates from every page. That is sometimes a drawback, for he is all too dismissive of his beloved's shortcomings'.

For example, he claims that Venice's subject populations were happy with their lot – which might seem peculiar 'to the exploited, expropriated Cretans who revolted 27 times during the four- and- a -half centuries of Venetian rule.'

THE DRESS DIARY OF MRS ANNE SYKES

SECRETS FROM A VICTORIAN WOMAN'S WARDROBE

KATE STRASDIN

Chatto,320pp,£22

Fashion victims? Victorian crinolines

It was the kind of market stall find an historian dreams of. In the 1970s, someone picked up a scrapbook containing 2,000 swatches of fabric, mementoes of the life in dress of a middle-class mid-Victorian woman and her friends. The album was given to cultural historian and costume afficionado Kate Strasdin and the result is this book, portrait of a woman's world for half a century.

In the *Guardian*, Kate Hughes was full of admiration for Strasdin's thoroughness of research. She uses the fabric, wrote Hughes, 'as a tool to unpick the dense network of economic, social and cultural threads woven into the samples. In the process she touches on everything from Britain's continued importation of cotton from the American slave states to the permissive delights of going to a fancy dress party dressed as Dolly Varden, one of Charles Dickens's saucier heroines.'

In the *Times*, Ysenda Maxtone Graham praised a 'charming book of micro-history.' She loved how Strasdin had sewn it all together: 'Snippets of fabric, snippets of biographical detail, snippets of historical evidence — this is a book entirely made up of snippets and I found it irresistible.'

In the *Sunday Times*, Katherine Harvey loved the unexpected nuggets unearthed by Strasdin's detective work: 'Underwear was kept white by regular rubbing with parboiled potatoes, circles of waxed cloth were sewn into dresses to prevent stains from sweaty armpits, and Britain's first postal dry-cleaning service was established in the 1860s.' And in the Observer, Hepzibah Anderson was charmed by a 'questing and poignant social history.' Book blogger, *Natterblog* was another fan: 'This book is an absolute treasure trove for anyone interested in the development of fabrics, Victorian social history and the ultimate demise of cotton and textile manufacturing in the UK.'

AN ENGLISH TRADITION?

THE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF FAIR PLAY

JONATHAN DUKE EVANS

OUP,464pp,£35

British politicians and journalists, more than their counterparts in any other country, like to allude to our national tradition of 'fair play'. Jonathan Duke-Evans's book sets out to find out how the concept came to be so central to Britain's idea of itself, and to interrogate what that vague phrase actually means. It has been associated with Englishness, the author discovers, ever since Daniel Defoe, and makes its way through history via (among other things) chivalric romance and Victorian sporting culture.

Reviewing it in the *Telegraph*, Robert Tombs admitted to 'a pleasant surprise': Duke-Evans does not, as most academic historians would, automatically set out to debunk the notion and 'dismiss it as a self-serving myth devoid of reality.' Rather, he 'makes a meticulous study of the history of the phrase' and links it to 'broader ideas of justice, equity and honour, philosophically and historically.'

The result is 'a long book', he warned, whose 'footnotes contain important parts of the argument: the author's wish to be comprehensive [...] sometimes leads to a loss of direction and a surfeit of information.' Yet 'Duke-Evans's conclusion is 'that "fair play" although often contravened, was something real.'

Sam Leith in the *Sunday Times* was impressed that Duke-Evans managed to 'supply a historical account of so nebulous, so abstract an idea,' and though he warned that some sections were 'tough going for the non-academic reader', he admired the scope and subtlety of the argument.

In the *Times*, Henry Hitchings agreed that Duke Evans displayed 'a style at once rigorous and personable' and commended the author's 'keen eye for a shiny nugget of information.'.

ENGLISH FOOD

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY

DIANE PURKISS

William Collins,560pp,£30

Diane Purkiss's compendious history of English food is, wrote Lucy Lethbridge in the *Literary Review*, a 'delectable banquet' of a book. It is certainly stuffed with every conceivable kind of foodstuff, divided into broad categories (apples, pigs, loaves, fishes and tinned foods among them) interspersed with discursive essays on, for example, breakfast.

John Bull's favourite fare

Many reviewers relished the book's raisins but struggled with the surrounding dough. In the *Spectator*, Annie Gray wondered why, when she covered so many foods, she had omitted sugar. But she thought 'when on a roll, Purkiss weaves together snippets from across the millennia into a narrative that flows beautifully.'

In the *Guardian*, Felicity Cloake was waylaid by small errors. 'In her eagerness to include as much as she can, Purkiss hasn't stopped to check smaller details – HP and Harvey's sauce are very different things; Janet Keiller of the (probably apocryphal) Dundee marmalade origin story was James's mother, not his wife – or interrogate sweeping statements, such as the startling claim that "at the beginning of the 20th century, few people had even tasted one freshly laid egg in their lives".'

Gerard de Groot in the *Times* however warmed to Purkiss's idiosyncratic style: 'She is refreshingly iconoclastic – acerbic, witty, opinionated and devoid of pomposity.' And in the *Sunday Times*, Christopher Hart enjoyed a 'fabulous read' which he consumed with 'gusto.'

Miscellaneous

AN ADMIRABLE POINT
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EXCLAMATION MARK!

FLORENCE HAZRAT

Profile,176pp,£12.99

Talk about controversial! Podcasting grammarian Florence Hazrat thinks exclamation marks are not to be sneered at. Purists think they are the linguistic equivalent to laughing at your own joke, but according to *Publishers' Weekly*, Hazrat 'reclaims the exclamation mark from its much maligned and misunderstood place at the bottom of the punctuation hierarchy.'

Henry Hitchings in the *Times Literary Supplement* thought the book as' not so much an encomium as an invitation – to shrug off the prescriptions of the language police and reawaken a sense of wonder.' Hazrat's history of the mark begins with a fourteenth-century Italian poet who claimed to have invented it and finishes with the 'awkward pushiness' with which it has been employed by modern politicians such as Donald Trump who used it, she writes, 'to inject constant strife and overexcitement into the digital sphere.'

Nicholas Lezard in the *Spectator* confessed, despite himself, to making occasional use of an exclamation mark. 'I quite like the Spanish idea of using an upside down exclamation mark at the beginning of a sentence and ending with a right-side up one – although does it defuse the surprise value of a final ! or enhance it? Hazrat's book is scholarly enough to tell us who invented it and when (the Spanish Academy, in 1754) but also that the following words were Bart Simpson's very first – and he used them, extremely appropriately, when he saw his parents having sex: ¡Ay Caramba!'

STILL PICTURES
ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND MEMORY

JANET MALCOLM

Granta,155pp,£16.99

This posthumous book of short essays from the journalist Janet Malcolm (she died in 2021) was hailed as a must for her fans. It's a typically subversive form of autobiography from somebody who had no time for

Camera obscura: Janet Malcolm

the genre and thought writers must 'subdue memory's autism'. The personal photographs she chose for the book in some cases showed scenes she stated she no longer remembered.

This was a clever move, decided David Aaronovitch in the *Times*, allowing Malcolm to bypass all the diurnal dross of her life and to zero in on its key features: the train her family took from Prague in 1939 en route to New York, family friends the Traubs, her second husband.

What the reviewers prized in particular was Malcolm's refusal to accept surfaces. As Aaronovitch noted, she always asked whether people 'are really the way they appear'.

Rachel Cooke in the *Guardian* echoed this, praising Malcolm's technique of pondering not the facts of people's lives but the 'compact mythologies' surrounding them. For both, this was the approach that distinguished her journalism.

In the *Sunday Times*, Claire Lowdon warned that 'the first half of this elegant book might feel like your favourite band choosing a little-known B-track for an encore'. The chapter titled 'Sam Chwat', though, about a voice coach who helped her win a 10-year legal battle, was vintage Malcolm, 'playful and engrossing'.

Lucy Scholes in the *Daily Telegraph* noted an important insight in the book's introduction by Malcolm's friend Ian Frazier. He noted that she 'had a knack for choosing which ephemera to save.'

For Scholes, *Still Pictures* is a 'similarly eclectic but carefully crafted work of montage [..] of dead ends, of things forgotten' and 'a bittersweet reminder' of Malcolm's extraordinary talents.'

AWE
THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF EVERYDAY WONDER

DACHER KELTNER

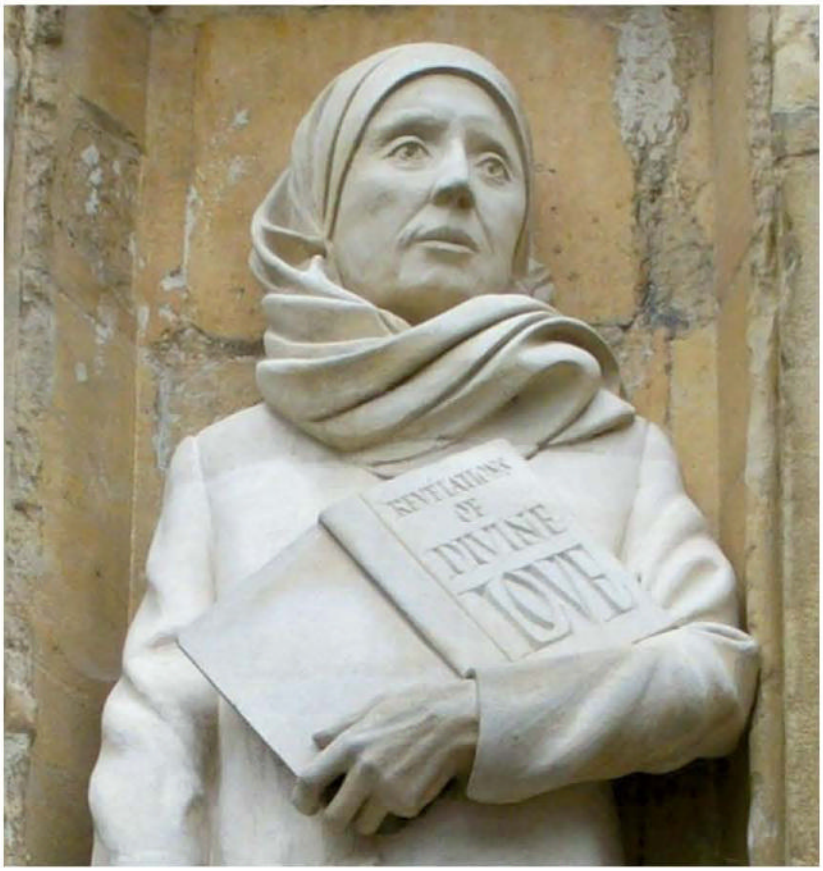
Allen Lane, 336pp,£25

The author is professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and his latest book explores the history, psychology and meaning of awe. Early on in the book, as Edward Posnett explained in the Guardian, 'Keltner defines awe as "the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world"....[he] tells us that the experience of awe varies among different cultures, but it is a universal emotion, one accompanied by its own language of chills, tears and "vocal bursts", like "oohs" or "whoas".'

There are, according to Keltner, biological reasons why awe makes us happy: it 'soothes stress and increases the dopamine levels in our brains', wrote Tomiwa Owolade in the *Sunday Times*. But he thought that Keltner's case studies (for example, prisoners painting flowers and sunsets; watching David Attenborough's *Planet Earth* at home; playing and listening to music) were more convincing than science when he argued 'that it is awe, more than any other emotion, that makes us truly happy'.

Posnett thought Awe made for an 'interesting, if disorientating, reading experience' but it left him with more questions than answers: 'Is awe always the pathway to happiness? Anyone who dips into the troubled history of the 20th century will learn that fascism was adept at harnessing the power of awe, whether through monumental architecture or mass rallies.' Owolade agreed: 'Being bound together by awe can be joyous. But it can also be destructive.'

In the *Financial Times*, Anjana Ahuja thought the 'true soul of this book [was] as a self-help manual intended to guide the reader towards their own source of everyday awe. Some practitioners seem rather self-absorbed,' she wrote: 'one interviewee photographed her own tears.' She added, however, that 'Keltner's core message, imploring us to smell the coffee and whoa at it, is a welcome one in our overscheduled times.'



Giant intellect: Julian of Norwich

FOR THY GREAT PAIN HAVE MERCY ON MY LITTLE PAIN

VICTORIA MACKENZIE

Bloomsbury,176pp,£14.99

Victoria Mackenzie's debut novel imagines the historical meeting of two medieval mystics: Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich. Despite its remote historical subject, Mackenzie breathes life into two remarkable women, one an anchorite whose life was intensely interior and the other a rumbunctious visionary and world pilgrim.

It received rapturous reviews. The *Observer*'s Hepzibah Anderson found it 'transfixing' and in the *Guardian*, for Frank Cottrell-Boyce it was 'electrifying.' Mackenzie's Margery, he writes, is 'boastful, vulnerable, courageous, confused, mouthy, libidinous, attentive and impossible not to love.' Her portrait of Julian by contrast enters 'a body narrowly confined so that the soul and mind can play across a cosmic landscape and opens up for us Julian's giant intellect.'

In the *Scotsman*, Stuart Kelly was also impressed by Mackenzie's evocation of contrasting worlds. 'So one is cloistered and the other the subject of gossip and innuendo; one is set apart from the world and the other rubs the world's face in the Word.' Both voices in the novel 'have their own poetry, and it is judged very carefully.' The best aspect, Kelly wrote, was that they 'are not there as mystics, but humans, with struggles, aspirations, regrets, insights and choices. These two remarkable people could never be there as paste-board representative medieval women.'

Blogger *A Life in Books* was similarly blown away by 'a riveting book, extraordinarily ambitious for a debut but Mackenzie carries it off beautifully.'

AVALON

NELL ZINK

Faber,224pp,£14.99

Avalon is the story of the life of Bran, from age ten to late teens. Bran lives with and works for her foster parents who run a nursery of exotic plants which is a front for criminal activity. She develops quirky, innocent relationships with her school friends. Reviewers fell on the word weird to describe Zink's writing.

Molly Young, writing in the *NY Times*, caught the gist of Nell Zink's sixth novel succinctly. She said, Avalon is about 'a girl with a weird job in a weird place whose writing talent is overlooked because of her circumstances, but who will eventually (probably) triumph, demonstrating that you can't judge a person by her credentials'. In other words, it is a weird coming-of-age story. But, she added, 'you enter its world voluntarily and add your reading effort to Zink's writing effort with the idea that the sum of [her]

> It will give you more that's genuinely new than 99 per cent of books this year

energies will create a zone of mirth and meaning'. Sarah Ditum in the *Sunday Times* confirmed this; 'with Zink, the only sure thing is that your expectations are going to be foiled.' But, "if Avalon is 'about' anything, it's that craving for salvation, for a place of purity and healing like the title." Ditum concluded that Avalon is a 'hilarious, heart-breaking and - of course - extremely weird novel.' Sandra Newman, in the *Guardian*, described Zink as 'one of America's most exciting writers.' For her, Zink is 'both a very satisfying and a frustrating writer. Her plots are shapeless but oddly propulsive. Her narrative style is a tissue of quips that strays into glibness, even in her best work.' She recommended it; it is a 'pleasure and will give you more that's genuinely new than 99% of books to be published this year.'

A DANGEROUS BUSINESS

JANE SMILEY

Abacus,224pp,£16.99

Veteran American novelist Jane Smiley, author of the 1991 Pulitzer-winning A Thousand Acres, has branched out unexpectedly with her new historical thriller. Set in nineteenth-century California, in the frontier town of Monterey, it stars a prostitute turned detective named Eliza Ripple on the hunt for a serial killer bumping off the local sex workers.

Reviewers of *A Dangerous Business* were on the whole underwhelmed. Nilanjana Roy in the *Financial Times* gave it the benefit of the doubt. 'a revisionist historical Western that peeks into the unruly lives of women and a literary tribute to Poe who pioneered the detective novel.' But 'startlingly flat and unsatisfying' was the verdict of Erica Wagner in the *Guardian*. 'It's a mystery with no mystery, a book in which the characters develop not a whit.'

Jane Smiley: disappointing

In the *Times*, Melissa Katsoulis thought it 'silly' and 'full of surprises, although precious few relating to the plot.' Katsoulis was particularly unconvinced by Eliza Ripple, 'an archetypal happy hooker such as we haven't seen in literary fiction for decades.' And the reviewer on Kirkus was perplexed by a 'strange little book' in which 'a naïve, plainspoken style of narration and characterisation makes even scenes of copulation and gore seem sort of G-rated.' Susannah Butter in the Times, however, was more positive. 'Smiley doesn't dwell on tragedy or tell us much about the dead women, preferring to bound along with the action and pack in as much plot as she can.'

HOTEL MILANO

TIM PARKS

Harvill Secker,240pp,£18.99

Tim Parks, the author of Hotel Milano, once confessed that he sometimes failed to finish novels he was reading. He pondered why this should be and concluded that it was to allow the author to escape the 'near-impossible task of getting out of the plot gracefully.'

His latest novel is set at the outbreak of Covid in Italy, March 2020. Retired journalist Frank Marriot resolves to ignore the warning signs of a pandemic, flies to Italy to attend a funeral and finds himself confined in a (very nice) hotel. We can guess at the graceful plot ending but what follows as its 'subterranean theme', is the 'the moral education of the hero'.

Allan Massie, writing in the *Scotsman*, hugely appreciated this 'carefully crafted novel' in which life lessons are learned: 'Some novels are a voyage of discovery for author as well as reader: how do I know what I mean till I see what I've written?' Tim Parks, with almost 20 novels to his name, is however an accomplished plot-master. The reader is safe in his hands.' (Parks also avoids one of Massie's bugbears: 'happily, it's not written in the tiresome and fashionable present tense.')

> A carefully-crafted novel in which life lessons are learned

Jude Cook agreed with Massie's admiration for Parks' plot-mastery in the *Guardian*. Once confined to his hotel and learning the new ways of Covid, the rest of the novel might seem obvious, but: 'we feel Parks won't, to use his own phrase, get out of his plot gracefully: Frank's head-in-the-sand hubris seems bound to lead to his downfall.Yet it's here that the novel veers off into much more interesting territory.'

For Cook, 'Hotel Milano comes closest to evoking what it was really like to watch the world be redrawn in real time.'

KICK THE LATCH

KATHRYN SCANLAN

Daunt,96pp,£9.99

Your heart might sink at the thought of an 'experimental' novel but praise for Scanlan's new book was universal. It takes the form, related Anthony Cummins in the Guardian, of 'a kind of ghosted memoir drawn on [real] conversations with Sonia, a horse trainer from the Midwest, looking back on her life'. 'In a series

Horse power: a vivid account

of vignettes drawn from transcribed conversations,' wrote Wendy Erskine, also in the Guardian, 'the reader encounters dilapidated trailers, racetracks, backs of vans, long hours, brutality, beauty and joy'.

All were astonished by the book's brevity, at a mere 160 pages; 'I don't want to waste the reader's time,' is Scanlan's explanation, as described by Susie Mesure in the *Financial Times*. 'Does her approach pay off?' Mesure asks. 'To channel Scanlan, the short answer is: yes. Kick the Latch is a triumph.'

Sonia knows from an early age that she wants to be a jockey and: 'By her teens she's spending summers working at stables in exchange for lodging, learning about feeding and conditioning and interval training and selective breeding and line breeding and hoof care and anatomy,' related Cummins.

Through Sonia, Scanlan details the difficult lives of the horses and those who look after them, including the jockeys, who go through 'tortures to reach their race weight', wrote Francesca Peacock in the Literary Review, 'starving themselves, sweating out water, throwing up everything they eat'. Sexual menace is forever in the air: Sonia is raped by a jockey and spends years in an abusive relationship. 'But men aren't allowed to overspill their vignettes, wrote Amber Medland in the Telegraph. 'Sonia doesn't give her victimhood that significance.' Scanlan's 'artfully artless minimalism' may frustrate you, conceded Cummins, but 'if we're left wanting more, we're also left wondering what more we could possibly want from a book so stuffed with life.'

MY FATHER'S HOUSE

JOSEPH O'CONNOR

Harvill Secker,288pp,£20

Joseph O'Connor has, wrote Anthony Cummins in the *Daily Mail*, a 'flair for spry historical fiction involving real-life figures.' He has already retold the story of Dracula's Bram Stoker and now 'he's on stellar form with this ensemble thriller based on the true story of an Irish Catholic priest plotting to smuggle Jewish and Allied prisoners out of Italy in 1943.'

Peter Kemp in the *Sunday Times* thought My Father's House, the story of Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, was a tour-de-force of operatic intensity. 'It celebrates triumphant against-the-odds camaraderie. It would require a present-day Puccini

Catholic hero: an Italian saviour

to do justice to its tremendous tale.' And in the *Daily Telegraph*, Houman Barekat agreed: 'While the benefit of historical hindsight inevitably diminishes the sense of jeopardy, the novel's evocative scene-setting, its propulsive narration and its powerful depiction of bravery and unity in extremis, all make for an engrossing read.' For the *Guardian*'s Lucy Popescu, it was 'beautifully crafted with razor-sharp dialogue to be savoured, and dark humour employed to great effect.'

The *Kirkus* reviewer was equally absorbed: 'If the story were told in typical thriller style, emphasizing action over language, it would still be good, but O'Connor's phrasings are a special joy. One unnamed cardinal is "a long drink of cross-eyed, buck-toothed misery if ever there was, he'd bore the snots off a wet horse." A deeply emotional read. And when the action is over, the coda could water an atheist's eye.'

REALLY GOOD ACTUALLY

MONICA HEISEY

4th Estate,384pp,£14.99

This, wrote Claire Allfree in the *Telegraph*, is the 'effusively hyped comic debut of TV writer Monica Heisey, whose screen credits include Schitt's Creek'. Its plot can be 'effectively summarised in one sentence: PhD student Maggie's husband walks out on their 608-day marriage, leaving her a stupefied, terrified divorcee at the tender age of 28; some 350 pages later she has just about got over him.' Several reviewers agreed it would make a great TV series but as a novel lacked depth. Ben East in the *Metro* thought it felt like a 'Sex and the City for social media-obsessed millennials'.

Every time Heisey comes close to a serious idea about Maggie's inner turmoil, he went on, it's 'bookended with a deadpan quip'. Shahidha Bari in the *Guardian* clearly wanted to root for this Toronto-set novel, describing it as 'smart and funny', with a 'likeable heroine', but she too was wearied by the 'seemingly tireless facility for jokes and comic self-deprecation' which she felt allowed Heisey to 'skate over the more serious concerns: the deep feelings of brokenness and loss that come in the wake of a failed

> A seemingly tireless facility for jokes and comic self-deprecation

relationship'. Her mode of storytelling via text messages and Tinder correspondence with 'chapters comprised entirely of Google search history terms ("24 hour delivery Toronto", "how to delete TikTok")' displayed a 'breezy confidence' but 'obstructed the possibility of real insight'.

Alex Peake-Tomkinson in the *Standard* pointed out in Heisey's defence that 'this kind of self-deprecating character is harder to write than it looks: our heroine needs to be hopeless enough to be relatable but without straying into behaviour that is too desperate'. Clare Allfree griped that the writing was 'lazy', but Peake-Tomkinson praised her for the ending, wherein she moves into the basement suite of a colleague along with two other professors and her life gradually improves – but 'Heisey cannily stops this from sounding like a fairytale transformation'.

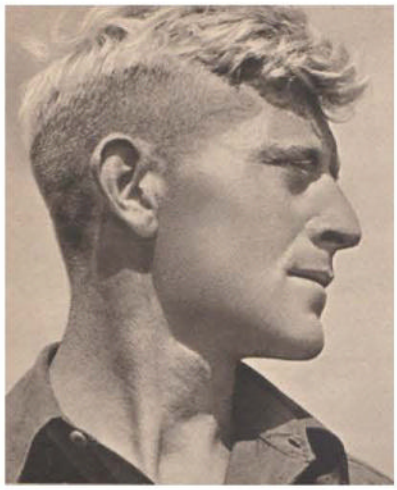
THIS OTHER EDEN

PAUL HARDING

Hutchinson,224pp,£16.99

Novelist Paul Harding writes award-winning prose. His latest novel, set in 1911, on an island off the coast of Maine, received tributes from most reviewers – even those worried that style smothered storytelling. In the *Times*, Tomiwa Owelade found Harding's 'fastidious tendency to describe the texture of people's hair or the gradations of their eyes comes at the expense of the reader fully inhabiting his characters' souls.'

This Other Eden retells the real-life story of Malaga Island whose mixed community of outsiders was destroyed by officialdom in thrall to the then fashionable theory of eugenics. As the *Kirkus* reviewer noted, 'A brief book that carries the weight of history.' The *Guardian*'s Rachel Seiffert enjoyed the descriptions of 'descendants of freedmen and Irish, of 'Penobscot grandmothers and Swedish grandpas', some still recognisably Angolan or Congolese in heritage, others like the Lark family 'drained of all colour'. In their veins 'run blood from every continent but Antarctica'.



Paul Harding: much to say to our times

In the Scotsman, Allan Massie acknowledged fine writing but also that it 'does sometimes veer towards the self-indulgent.' Like Seiffert he enjoyed the island life. 'There is kindness, sympathy, humour and friendly cooperation among the islanders. Some are eccentric, some are wise. For the most part they are caring.'

Although the novel inevitably ends in tragedy, Seiffert saw a lesson: 'It is a story of good intentions, bad faith, worse science, but also a tribute to community and human dignity and the possibility of another world. In both, it has much to say to our times.'

THE NEW LIFE

TOM CREWE

Chatto,384pp,£16.99

Tom Crewe's debut novel 'crafts a meaningful tribute' wrote Peter Kispert in the *New York Times*, to John Addington Symonds and Havelock Ellis, co-authors of a study of 'sexual inversion' which ran into controversy in the wake of the trial of Oscar Wilde. It opens with a dangerous queer encounter in a London underground train and, wrote Kispert, reminds us that 'it is worth a cost to acknowledge these desires and loves as true, as natural.'

In the novel, Henry Ellis is in a chaste marriage to a woman sleeping with another woman, and uncomfortably married John Addington has moved into his home a 'secretary' Frank, with whom he can finally express homosexual desire.

Crewe has conjured up the spirit of high-minded London circles in the 1890s but, reviewers thought the book markedly low on humour. According to John Maier in the *Times* who found some of the descriptive passages 'fabulously overworked', 'the book more or less lacks a comic dimension, a feature that becomes most noticeable in the course of the rather over-solemn handling of the characters populating the Society of the New Life, the progressive organisation to which Ellis and his wife belong.

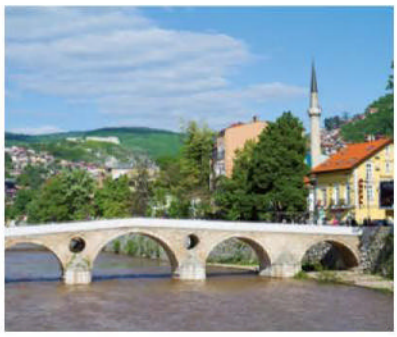
'Crewe, ' thought Maier, 'didn't get the joke about the error-prone earnestness of the kind of people who have never encountered an unpromising political cause they don't feel like advocating.'

In the *Daily Telegraph*, Rupert Christiansen, though he also noted the 'total absence of humour', welcomed a 'rich authorial intelligence' and 'a fictional debut of rare quality and promise.'

THE WORLD AND ALL THAT IT HOLDS

ALEKSANDAR HEMON

Picador,352pp£18.99



Sarajevo: start of an epic adventure

The title is clearly not misleading: 'majestic', 'epic' and 'immense' are just some of the adjectives used to describe this book, with Lucy Hughes-Hallett in the *Guardian* adding that she would be 'surprised if [she enjoyed] a novel more this year'. Its sweep is clearly enormous, opening in 1914 in Sarajevo, as Lucy Popescu described in the *FT*, and ending in Shanghai in 1949.

> A tale about the resilience of true love

Hughes-Hallett listed the many elements: 'Journeys that take years and lives that span continents; falling empires and storied cities; so many wars they blur and merge in the characters' memories; indelible loves, unbearable losses; dreams and songs and megalomaniac delusions.'

The main character is Rafael Pinto, a gay Bosnian-Jewish poet and apothecary who emerges from his shop in Sarajevo to witness the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the 'pink blood still bubbling on his lips', as Adam Mars Jones had it in the *New York Times*.

Thence begins Pinto's 'picaresque journey', wrote Ron Charles in the *Washington Post*, wending its way across Europe and Asia, 'one harrowing gonzo adventure arriving after another' as Pinto and Osman, the Muslim soldier he falls in love with, 'find themselves blown from battle to battle, atrocity to atrocity'. At some point Osman disappears, presumed dead, and his daughter, Rahela, takes centre stage in Pinto's life. Popescu described how 'the brutality of conflict and displacement is beautifully contrasted with the tenderness of the men's love story and, later, by the father-daughter relationship – the throbbing of love for a child that was not even his'.

'There's plenty of horror in these fiery pages,' concluded Ron Charles, 'but the irrepressible voice glides along a cushion of poignancy buoyed by wry humour. From start to finish, Hemon is telling a tale about the resilience of true love.'

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

MICHAEL BRACEWELL

White Rabbit,192pp,£16.99

It's been 21 years since Michael Bracewell's last novel and his many fans have been eagerly awaiting *Unfinished Business*. It is 'quite the comeback' pronounced the *Observer*'s Anthony Quinn. The lead character, Martin Knight, whose empty, monied life seemed to embody the 1980s, last appeared in Bracewell's *Conclave* when he was in his early thirties. Now he is drunk, divorced and deep into middle age, 'a Prufrockian clerk in a dark suit, an office "lifer" who commutes from Hackney to the glass and steel canyons of the City to do a job he no longer understands.'

In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Gwendoline Riley found that 'time has become Martin's baffling and accusing past. We see him crossing the road to the station, where, "in the cold flat light, the shuttered Venus Sports Bar looked as though it had been locked and empty for years".' Riley was among many reviewers who admired Bracewell's capacity to evoke the landscape of modern culture. And over at the *New Statesman,* John Burnside marvelled at how 'the ghost of Proust hovers discreetly in the background, not only in the wonderful invocations of how memory works but also in fleeting glimpses of a mortality that spares not even the privileged and the entitled: "The socialites and minglers, their laughter spilling out so easily; still blissfully, proudly at ease with their achievements; yet to notice the shadows lengthening on the lawn."'

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Witch Lit

AMBER PEARSON considers the resurgence of witches in fiction

It seems that witches are having a moment. Or, at least, that's what publishers are banking on.

The success of bestselling books like Stacey Hall's **The Familiars**, **Circe** by Madeleine Miller and **The Binding** by Bridget Collins, with their blend of history and magic - and darkly beautiful covers of twisting leaves, animals and magical symbols - suggests there's an appetite for books about witchcraft waiting to be tapped.

While the results of the latest census revealed that Christianity is now a minority religion in England and Wales, more pagans and wiccans were counted than ever before.

None of this would have come as a surprise to King James I, of course, who complained in his **Daemonologie** of a 'fearefull aboundinge at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaves of the Devill, the Witches or enchanters' - and in doing so helped unleash waves of hysteria about a great demonic conspiracy.

Offering a formal apology in 2022 to the thousands of people who were accused of witchcraft in Scotland alone (over 75% of whom were women), Nicola Sturgeon pointed out that the 'deep misogyny' motivating the Scottish Witchcraft Act of 1563 was not a thing of the past: 'Today it expresses itself not in claims of witchcraft, but in everyday harassment, online rape threats and sexual violence.'

Maybe it's little surprise, then, that the three new titles which have just been published, loosely grouped under the banner of 'Witch Lit', have a distinctly dark, angry energy - these are not books about the sort of witches who'd feel at home in Hogwarts, and there's not a broomstick among them.

All are set, in part, at times of historical witch trials. **The Witches of Vardø**, Anya Bergman's powerful debut, is based on a witch trial that took place in Northern Norway in 1662 - an event that bears chilling comparisons to the Salem witch trials thirty years later.

Now She Is Witch by Kirsty Logan is a more lushly poetic depiction of a medieval girl's quest to find her power and place in the world - and exact a violent revenge.

In Emilia Hart's highly-readable debut **Weyward**, three women from the same family are connected across hundreds of years by shared powers and experiences.

Burning witches in Germany: around 80,000 died in Europe between 1500 -1666

None are escapist supernatural reads: they are out to shock us, to hammer home the cruelty inflicted on women accused of witchcraft - the confinement, the torture, the general contempt in which the women were held - and should probably come garlanded with trigger warnings.

'Ten days they held me here. Ten days, with only the stink of my own flesh for company,' reads the opening to **Weyward**. (And, that's one of the tamer passages.)

What's striking is how little magic is actually mentioned.

They feel like books written by women in a fury

There's a nod to magical realism, an animal familiar or two, some impressive manipulation of swarms of insects and birds; but their authors mostly emphasise more nebulous powers: the strength of female friendship and maternal love; the power of stories and finding your voice; the knowledge of plants (particularly poisonous ones) and a deep appreciation of nature.

Life, they suggest, would be so much better if only men stopped trying to define, control and pigeonhole women; if only we could run through the woods at night and bathe in pools, unmolested. To be fair, it seems little enough to ask.

In contrast to the freedom and wildness of nature, towns, forts and strongholds exist as man-made centres of power designed to hold women captive. Indeed it probably goes without saying that most men do not come well out of this.

'There are no witches in our village... but the Devil does exist. Look into the eyes of our accusers and you will see him there,' as one of **Vardø**'s 'witches' succinctly puts it.

It would be easy to read these novels as an attempt to right historical wrongs and give the women who were treated with such contempt a retrospective power and voice.

However, ultimately they are not really about the past. Instead, what comes across is a very modern anger.

At a time when the news seems full of our leaders manipulating the truth or espousing conspiracy theories for their own ends; when natural habitats are being thoughtlessly destroyed and people are increasingly disconnected from nature; when the people who should be protecting us are the ones attacking us, these women are fed up with being belittled, patronised and overpowered.

'Make the men afraid of you,' explains one character from **The Witches Of Vardø**.

'They won't love you, so you will have to make them fear you,' teaches a mother in **Now She Is Witch**.

Maybe what unites these three novels is not their pretty covers, nor even that they all feature women who may or may not be witches, but that they feel like books written by women in a fury.

And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm off to tend to the plants in my poison garden.

EMILY BEARN on Coronation Books for Children

This season, children's fiction hails a new superhero in the form of King Charles III, who stars in a galore of picture books to mark the Coronation. For the youngest readers, **The King's Coronation** by Marion Billet (Campbell, £6.99) is a skilfully immersive board book, talking us through the big day with catchy rhyming text: 'It's coronation day today/The London crowds are on their way!'

Alas, events unfold less smoothly in **The King's Runaway Crown** (OUP, £7.99) by Rosalind Spark, in which His Majesty's Jack Russell absconds with the crown on the morning of the coronation. '"No!" cried the butler. "Catch Colin, save the crown!"'

And there is more mayhem for the hapless monarch in **The King's Pants** (Andersen, £7.99) by Nicholas Allen, when a Royal Mail blunder results in the loss of the Coronation pants. 'The King likes to dress well' – and on such a day his Everyday Pants simply will not do.

In chapter books, however, it is business as usual, with the focus on fantasy rather than the Royal Family.

For readers of seven-plus, Peter Bunzl's **Dragonracers** (£7.99, Barrington Stoke) is a nostalgic, beautifully-told Edwardian adventure about twins who are mad about aeronautics. When they find an egg which hatches a dragon, their dreams of flight take an unexpected turn.

And **Call the Puffins** by Cath Howe (Welbeck, £6.99) is the first in a delightfully madcap series about a group of young Puffins training to join a search and rescue team. Muffin is embarrassed by her feet; Tiny has poor eyesight; and the bumptious Forti is not as confident as he seems. But in a gently suspenseful plot, we see if , together, they can help the other birds.

Animal lovers should also look out for **Nell and the Cave Bear: The Journey Home** (£6.99, Piccadilly Press), the second instalment in Martin Brown's enchanting series about an orphaned girl who befriends a bear. '[Nell] didn't have parents to bundle her in blankets or friends to walk home with. It didn't usually bother her … Cave Bear was the best friend she could ever want.' But their happiness is threatened when the accident-prone bear is pursued by woodland hunters.

For older readers, it has been a bumper spring for historical fiction. **The Biscuit Barrel Murder** (The Book Guild, £8.99) is an ebullient debut by Geoffrey Start, set in the 1920s. With an aristocratic detective, a parliamentary candidate unfairly convicted of murdering her fiancé; and regular stops for gourmet lunches, this is crime fiction as its comforting best. ('I poured my tea and picked up [a] ginger nut … trying to imagine what might drive a person to lace a biscuit with deadly poison.')

A decade on, **I, Spy** by Rhian Tracey (Piccadilly Press, £7.99) is the gripping story of a young girl growing up in the 1930s at Bletchley Park, where her father works as a driver. When war breaks out, sinister goings on convince Robyn that there is an enemy in the park's midst. ('Bletchley Park was starting to look like a prison, rather than her home.')

And The Boy Who Didn't Want to Die (£7.99, Scholastic) by Peter Lantos tells the true story of the author's journey through war-torn Europe with his Hungarian Jewish family, ending in Bergen-Belsen where his father died.

Lantos's memoir **Parallel Lines** was published to huge acclaim in 2006. This is his first book for children, and his gentle, starkly precise prose makes for an extraordinarily moving testimony.

Some readers might be surprised to learn that stories set in the 1970s now count as historical fiction – but that is the description given to **Where the River Takes Us** (£7.99, Bloomsbury) by Lesley Parr, which follows the plight of two orphaned children fending for themselves during the 1974 miner's strikes. When they embark on a hunt for a mythical beast believed to stalk their Welsh valley, their struggle for survival takes a life-changing turn.

In non-fiction, King Charles returns to centre stage, knocking books about dinosaurs and ecology into the shade. For a modern fairy-tale involving blended families, few stories can beat **King Charles** by Maria Sanchez Vegara, the latest title in the hugely successful **Little People, Big Dreams** series of biographies for children (£9.99, Frances Lincoln). Following the monarch's journey from 'little Prince to grown-up King', it recounts his marriage to his 'fairy-tale princess' Diana, which was doomed when they discovered they 'had very little in common'. Happily, he then married Camilla, 'his closest friend for thirty-five years.'

Readers with an appetite for royal trivia, meanwhile, should not miss **Amazing Facts: King Charles III** by Hannah Wilson (£4.99, Red Shed), in which we learn that Charles has played the cello on television; has had a tropical tree frog named after him; and that he once scuba-dived to see the wreck of the Mary Rose.

Clockwise from top: The King´s Pants, Where the River Takes Us, Call the Puffins

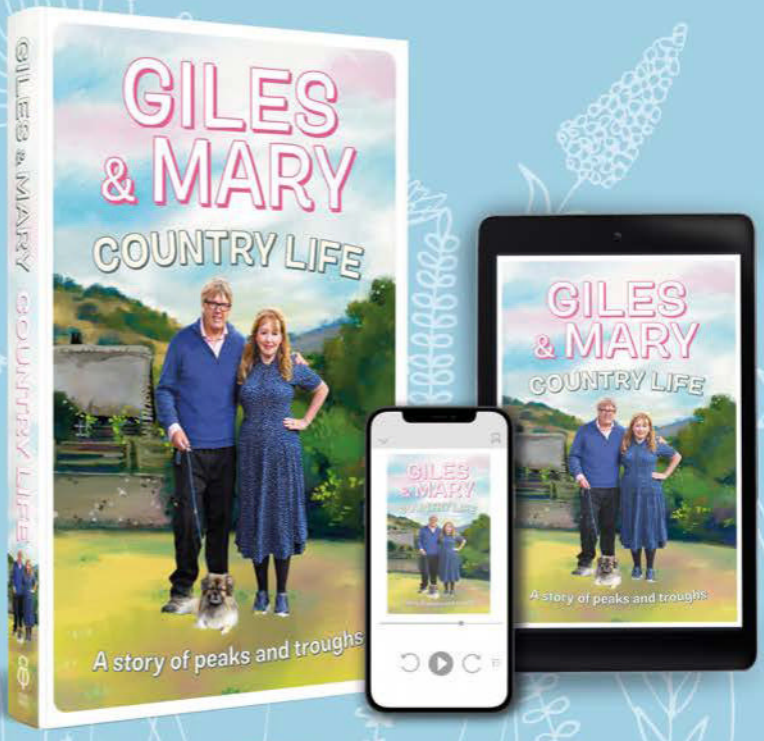
GILES & MARY

COUNTRY LIFE

Giles and Mary swapped city life for rural Wiltshire over thirty years ago, and they've each embraced it in their own very different ways.

Mary has happily traded sophisticated London salons for monthly lectures at the Farmers' Club, competitive school quizzes, church interactions and local Auction House sales. While Giles has immersed himself in the catastrophic consequences of conventional farming, his organic no-dig veg-patch, the increasingly disproportionate response by local landlords to harmless trespassers and the strange death of the village house martins.

For recent city escapees and indigenous country folk alike, Giles and Mary sift through the unhelpful myths and offer a practical reality, with robust back and forth on every aspect of life in rural outposts. They share their hard-earned lessons, so we can learn the secret skills of grumbling and bumbling our way towards a new contented country life.



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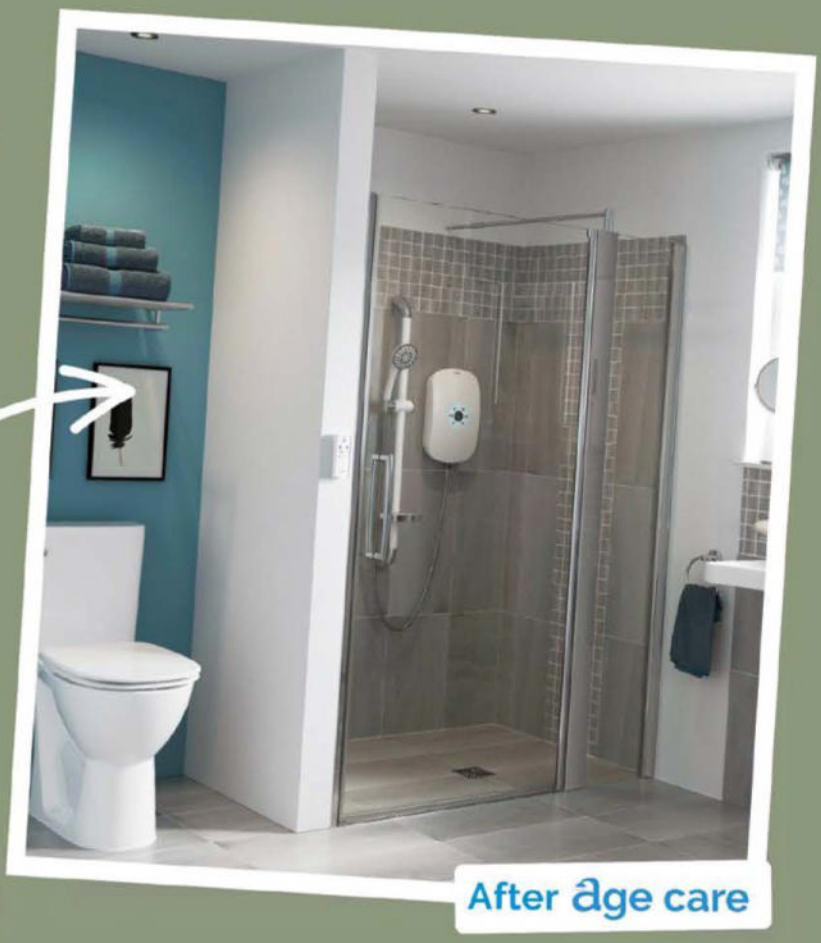

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